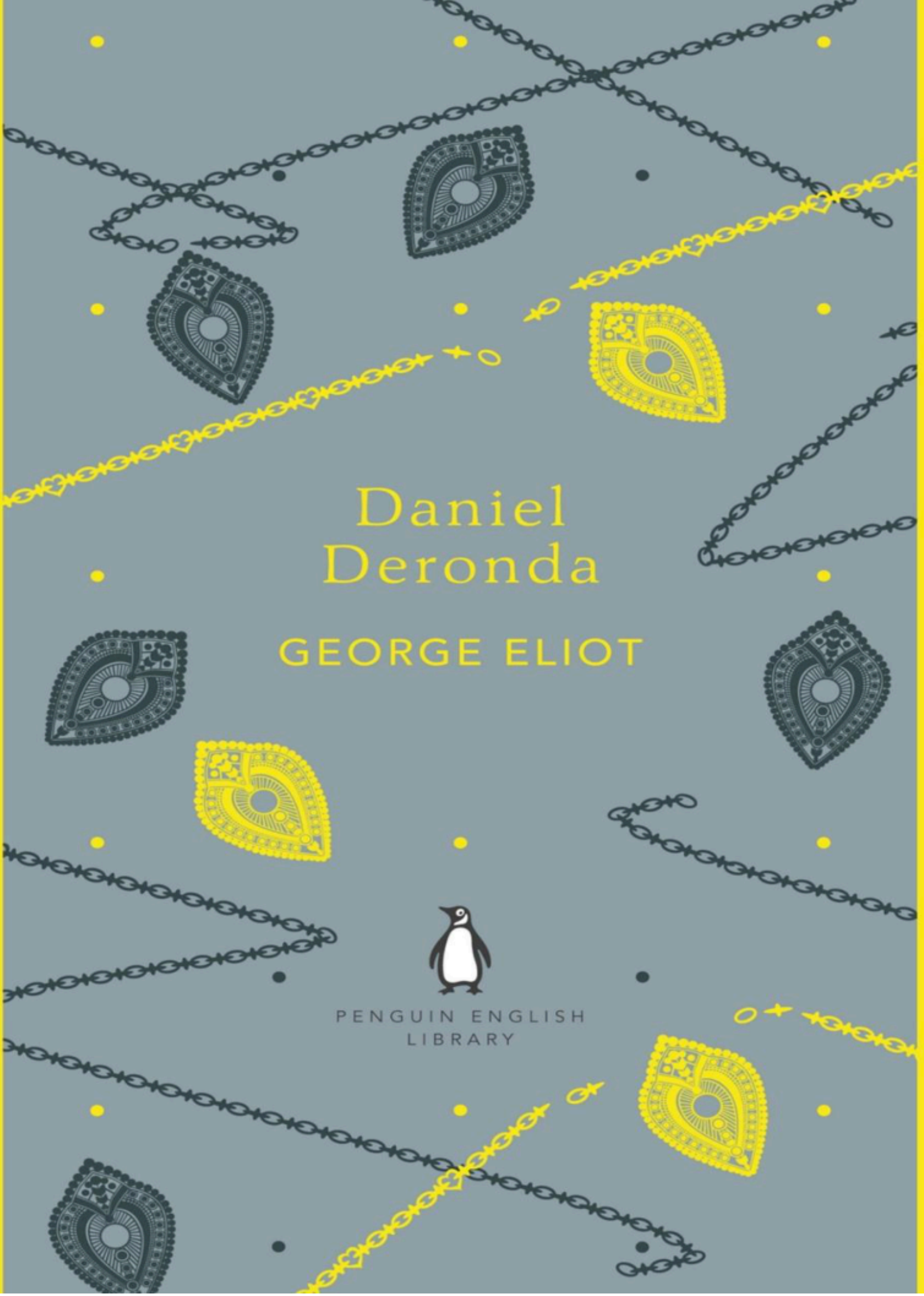

Daniel
Deronda
GEORGE ELIOT
PENGUIN ENGLISH
LIBRARY

PENGUIN
CLASSICS

PENGUIN ENGLISH
LIBRARY

George Eliot's last, most controversial novel opens as the spoiled Gwendolen Harleth, poised at a roulette table about to throw away a small fortune, captivates Daniel Deronda. As their lives become intertwined, they are also transformed by suffering, misfortune, revelations and Daniel's fascination with the Jewish singer Mirah.

Daniel Deronda shocked Victorian readers with its portrayal of the Jewish experience in British society, and remains a moving and epic portrayal of human passions.

• Robinson Crusoe • Gulliver's Travels • Pamela • Joseph Andrews • Tom Jones • Tristram Shandy • Humphry Clinker • Evelina • The Monk • Sense and Sensibility • Pride and Prejudice • Mansfield Park • Emma • Frankenstein • Northanger Abbey • Persuasion • Ivanhoe • Melmoth the Wanderer • The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner • The Pickwick Papers • Oliver Twist • Nicholas Nickleby • The Old Curiosity Shop • Barnaby Rudge • The Murders in the Rue Morgue and Other Tales • A Christmas Carol • Martin Chuzzlewit • Dombey and Son • Jane Eyre • Wuthering Heights • Mary Barton • The Tenant of Wildfell Hall • Vanity Fair • David Copperfield • Shirley • The Scarlet Letter • Cranford • Moby-Dick • Bleak House • Villette • Hard Times • North and South • Little Dorrit • The Warden • Barchester Towers • The Confidence-Man and Billy Budd, Sailor • Doctor Thorne • A Tale of Two Cities • Great Expectations • The Mill on the Floss • The Woman in White • Framley Parsonage • Silas Marner • Lady Audley's Secret • Our Mutual Friend • The Small House at Allington • Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass • Wives and Daughters • The Last Chronicle of Barset • The Moonstone • The Mystery of Edwin Drood • Middlemarch • Under the Greenwood Tree • Far From the Madding Crowd • Daniel Deronda • Daisy Miller and The Turn of the Screw • The Return of the Native • Washington Square • The Portrait of a Lady • Treasure Island and The Ebb-Tide • Two on a Tower • The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn • Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde • The Mayor of Casterbridge • New Grub Street • Tess of the D'Urbervilles • The Five Orange Pips and Other Cases • The Picture of Dorian Gray • Jude the Obscure • The Time Machine • The Island of Doctor Moreau • Dracula • The Invisible Man • The War of the Worlds • Heart of Darkness • Lord Jim • Kim • The Hound of the Baskervilles • The Wings of the Dove • The Way of All Flesh • Nostromo • The House of Mirth • Where Angels Fear to Tread • The Secret Agent • A Room With a View • The Man Who Was Thursday • Howards End • Ethan Frome • Sons and Lovers • Dubliners •

GEORGE ELIOT

Daniel Deronda

PENGUIN ENGLISH
LIBRARY

Contents

DANIEL DERONDA

BOOK ONE The Spoiled Child

BOOK TWO Meeting Streams

BOOK THREE Maidens Choosing

BOOK FOUR Gwendolen Gets Her Choice

BOOK FIVE Mordecai

BOOK SIX Revelations

BOOK SEVEN The Mother and the Son

BOOK EIGHT Fruit and Seed

‘Daniel Deronda’ *by Barbara Hardy*

Mary Ann Evans (George Eliot) (1819–80) was a philosopher, journalist and translator before she became a novelist, her first stories being published in 1856. She led an unconventional life, co-editing the left-wing journal *The Westminster Review* for three years and living for twenty years with the philosopher and married man George Henry Lewes. Her novels are among the greatest of the nineteenth century.

The Mill on the Floss, Silas Marner, Middlemarch and *Daniel Deronda* are all published in the Penguin English Library.

DANIEL DERONDA

BY

GEORGE ELIOT

VOL. I.

WILLIAM BLACKWOOD AND SONS
EDINBURGH AND LONDON
MDCCCLXXVI

Let thy chief terror be of thine own soul:
There, 'mid the throng of hurrying desires
That trample on the dead to seize their spoil,
Lurks vengeance, footless, irresistible
As exhalations laden with slow death,
And o'er the fairest troop of captured joys
Breathes pallid pestilence.

BOOK ONE

The Spoiled Child

Chapter One

> Men can do nothing without the make-believe of a beginning. Even Science, the strict measurer, is obliged to start with a make-believe unit, and must fix on a point in the stars' unceasing journey when his sidereal clock shall pretend that time is at Nought. His less accurate grandmother Poetry has always been understood to start in the middle; but on reflection it appears that her proceeding is not very different from his; since Science, too, reckons backwards as well as forwards, divides his unit into billions, and with his clock-finger at Nought really sets off *in medias res*. No retrospect will take us to the true beginning; and whether our prologue be in heaven or on earth, it is but a fraction of that all-presupposing fact with which our story sets out.

Was she beautiful or not beautiful? and what was the secret of form or expression which gave the dynamic quality to her glance? Was the good or the evil genius dominant in those beams? Probably the evil; else why was the effect that of unrest rather than of undisturbed charm? Why was the wish to look again felt as coercion and not as a longing in which the whole being consents?

She who raised these questions in Daniel Deronda's mind was occupied in gambling: not in the open air under a southern sky, tossing coppers on a ruined wall, with rags about her limbs; but in one of those splendid resorts which the enlightenment of ages has prepared for the same species of pleasure at a heavy cost of gilt mouldings, dark-toned colour and chubby nudities, all correspondingly heavy – forming a suitable condenser for human breath belonging, in great part, to the highest fashion, and not easily procurable to be breathed in elsewhere in the like proportion, at least by persons of little fashion.

It was near four o'clock on a September day, so that the atmosphere was well-brewed to a visible haze. There was deep stillness, broken only by a light rattle, a light chink, a small sweeping sound, and an occasional monotone in French, such as might be expected to issue from an ingeniously constructed automaton. Round two long tables were gathered two serried crowds of human beings, all save one having their faces and attention bent on the tables. The one exception was a melancholy little boy, with his knees and calves simply in their natural clothing of epidermis, but for the rest of his person in a fancy dress. He alone had his face turned towards the doorway, and fixing on it the blank gaze of a bedizened child stationed as a masquerading advertisement on the platform of an itinerant show, stood close behind a lady deeply engaged at the roulette-table.

About this table fifty or sixty persons were assembled, many in the outer rows, where there was occasionally a deposit of new comers, being mere spectators, only that one of them, usually a woman, might now and then be observed putting down a five-franc piece with a simpering air, just to see what the passion of gambling really was. Those who were taking their pleasure at a higher strength, and were absorbed in play, showed very distant varieties of European type: Livonian and Spanish, Graeco-Italian and miscellaneous German, English aristocratic and English plebeian. Here certainly was a striking admission of human equality. The white bejewelled fingers of an English countess were very near touching a bony, yellow, crab-like hand stretching a bared wrist to clutch a heap of coin – a hand easy to sort with the square, gaunt face, deep-set eyes, grizzled eyebrows, and ill-combed scanty hair which seemed a slight metamorphosis of the vulture. And where else would her ladyship have graciously consented to sit by that dry-lipped feminine figure prematurely old, withered after short bloom like her artificial flowers, holding a shabby velvet reticule before her, and occasionally putting in her mouth the point with which she pricked her card? There too, very near the fair countess, was a respectable London tradesman, blond and soft-handed, his sleek hair scrupulously parted behind and before, conscious of circulars addressed to the nobility and gentry, whose distinguished patronage enabled him to take his holidays fashionably, and to a certain extent in their distinguished company. Not his the gambler's passion that nullifies appetite, but a well-fed leisure, which in the intervals of winning money in business and spending it showily, sees no better resource than winning money in play and spending it yet more showily – reflecting always that Providence had never manifested any disapprobation of his amusement, and dispassionate enough to leave off if the sweetness of winning much and seeing others lose had turned to the sourness of losing much and seeing others win. For the vice of gambling lay in losing money at it. In his bearing there might be something of the tradesman, but in his pleasures he was fit to rank with the owners of the oldest titles. Standing close to his chair was a handsome Italian, calm, statuesque, reaching across him to place the first pile of napoleons from a new bagful just brought him by an envoy with a scrolled mustache. The pile was in half a minute pushed over to an old bewigged woman with eye-glasses pinching her nose. There was a slight gleam, a faint mumbling smile about the lips of the old woman; but the statuesque Italian

remained impassive, and – probably secure in an infallible system which placed his foot on the neck of chance – immediately prepared a new pile. So did a man with the air of an emaciated beau or worn-out libertine, who looked at life through one eye-glass, and held out his hand tremulously when he asked for change. It could surely be no severity of system, but rather some dream of white crows, or the induction that the eighth of the month was lucky, which inspired the fierce yet tottering impulsiveness of his play.

But while every single player differed markedly from every other, there was a certain uniform negativeness of expression which had the effect of a mask – as if they had all eaten of some root that for the time compelled the brains of each to the same narrow monotony of action.

Deronda's first thought when his eyes fell on this scene of dull, gas-poisoned absorption was that the gambling of Spanish shepherd-boys had seemed to him more enviable: – so far Rousseau might be justified in maintaining that art and science had done a poor service to mankind. But suddenly he felt the moment become dramatic. His attention was arrested by a young lady who, standing at an angle not far from him, was the last to whom his eyes travelled. She was bending and speaking English to a middle-aged lady seated at play beside her; but the next instant she returned to her play, and showed the full height of a graceful figure, with a face which might possibly be looked at without admiration, but could hardly be passed with indifference.

The inward debate which she raised in Deronda gave to his eyes a growing expression of scrutiny, tending farther and farther away from the glow of mingled undefined sensibilities forming admiration. At one moment they followed the movements of the figure, of the arms and hands, as this problematic sylph bent forward to deposit her stake with an air of firm choice; and the next they returned to the face which, at present unaffected by beholders, was directed steadily towards the game. The sylph was a winner; and as her taper fingers, delicately gloved in pale-grey, were adjusting the coins which had been pushed towards her in order to pass them back again to the winning point, she looked round her with a survey too markedly cold and neutral not to have in it a little of that nature which we call art concealing an inward exultation.

But in the course of that survey her eyes met Deronda's, and instead of averting them as she would have desired to do, she was unpleasantly conscious that they were arrested – how long? The darting sense that he was measuring her and looking down on her as an inferior, that he was of different quality from the human dross around her, that he felt himself in a region outside and above her, and was examining her as a specimen of a lower order, roused a tingling resentment which stretched the moment with conflict. It did not bring the blood to her cheeks, but sent it away from her lips. She controlled herself by the help of an inward defiance, and without other sign of emotion than this lip-paleness turned to her play. But Deronda's gaze seemed to have acted as an evil eye. Her stake was gone. No matter; she had been winning ever since she took to roulette with a few napoleons at command, and had a considerable reserve. She had begun to believe in her luck, others had begun to believe in it: she had visions of being followed by a *cortège* who would worship her as a goddess of luck and watch her play as a directing augury. Such things had been known of male gamblers; why should not a woman have a like supremacy? Her friend and chaperon who had not wished her to play at first was beginning to approve, only administering the prudent advice to stop at the right moment and carry money back to England – advice to which Gwendolen had replied that she cared for the excitement of play, not the winnings. On that supposition the present moment ought to have made the flood-tide in her eager experience of gambling. Yet when her next stake was swept away, she felt the orbits of her eyes getting hot, and the certainty she had (without looking) of that man still watching her was something like a pressure which begins to be torturing. The more reason to her why she should not flinch, but go on playing as if she were indifferent to loss or gain. Her friend touched her elbow and proposed that they should quit the table. For reply Gwendolen put ten louis on the same spot she was in that mood of defiance in which the mind loses sight of any end beyond the satisfaction of enraged resistance; and with the puerile stupidity of a dominant impulse includes luck among its objects of defiance. Since she was not winning strikingly, the next best thing was to lose strikingly. She controlled her muscles, and showed no tremor of mouth or hands. Each time her stake was swept off she doubled it. Many were now watching her, but the sole observation she was conscious of was Deronda's, who, though she never looked towards him, she was sure had not moved away. Such a drama takes no long while to play out: development and catastrophe can often be measured by nothing clumsier than the moment-hand. 'Faites votre jeu, mesdames et messieurs,' said the automatic voice of destiny from between the mustache and imperial of the croupier: and Gwendolen's arm was stretched to deposit her last poor heap of napoleons. 'Le jeu ne va plus,' said destiny. And in five seconds Gwendolen turned from the table, but turned resolutely with her face towards Deronda and looked at him. There was a smile of irony in his eyes as their glances met; but it was at least better that he should have kept his attention fixed on her than that he should have disregarded her as one of an insect swarm who had no individual physiognomy. Besides, in spite of his superciliousness and irony, it was difficult to believe that he did not admire her spirit as well as her person: he was young, handsome, distinguished in appearance – not one of those ridiculous and dowdy

Philistines who thought it incumbent on them to blight the gaming-table with a sour look of protest as they passed by it. The general conviction that we are admirable does not easily give way before a single negative; rather when any of Vanity's large family, male or female, find their performance received coldly, they are apt to believe that a little more of it will win over the unaccountable dissident. In Gwendolen's habits of mind it had been taken for granted that she knew what was admirable and that she herself was admired. This basis of her thinking had received a disagreeable concussion, and reeled a little, but was not easily to be overthrown.

In the evening the same room was more stiflingly heated, was brilliant with gas and with the costumes of many ladies who floated their trains along it or were seated on the ottomans.

The Nereid in sea-green robes and silver ornaments, with a pale sea-green feather fastened in silver falling backward over her green hat and light-brown hair, was Gwendolen Harleth. She was under the wing or rather soared by the shoulder of the lady who had sat by her at the roulette-table; and with them was a gentleman with a white mustache and clipped hair: solid-browed, stiff, and German. They were walking about or standing to chat with acquaintances; and Gwendolen was much observed by the seated groups.

'A striking girl – that Miss Harleth – unlike others.'

'Yes; she has got herself up as a sort of serpent now, all green and silver, and winds her neck about a little more than usual.'

'Oh, she must always be doing something extraordinary. She is that kind of girl, I fancy. Do you think her pretty, Mr Vandernoodt?'

'Very. A man might risk hanging for her – I mean, a fool might.'

'You like a *nez retroussé* then, and long narrow eyes?'

'When they go with such an *ensemble*.'

'The *ensemble du serpent*?'

'If you will. Woman was tempted by a serpent: why not man?'

'She is certainly very graceful. But she wants a tinge of colour in her cheeks: it is a sort of Lamia beauty she has.'

'On the contrary, I think her complexion one of her chief charms. It is a warm paleness: it looks thoroughly healthy. And that delicate nose with its gradual little upward curve is distracting. And then her mouth – there never was a prettier mouth, the lips curl backward so finely, eh, Mackworth?'

'Think so? I cannot endure that sort of mouth. It looks so self-complacent, as if it knew its own beauty – the curves are too immovable. I like a mouth that trembles more.'

'For my part I think her odious,' said a dowager. 'It is wonderful what unpleasant girls get into vogue. Who are these Langens? Does anybody know them?'

'They are quite *comme il faut*. I have dined with them several times at the *Russie*. The baroness is English. Miss Harleth calls her cousin. The girl herself is thoroughly well-bred, and as clever as possible.'

'Dear me! And the baron?'

'A very good furniture picture.'

'Your baroness is always at the roulette-table,' said Mackworth. 'I fancy she has taught the girl to gamble.'

'Oh, the old woman plays a very sober game; drops a ten-franc piece here and there. The girl is more headlong. But it is only a freak.'

'I hear she has lost all her winnings to-day. Are they rich? Who knows?'

'Ah, who knows? Who knows that about anybody?' said Mr Vandernoodt, moving off to join the Langens.

The remark that Gwendolen wound her neck about more than usual this evening was true. But it was not that she might carry out the serpent idea more completely: it was that she watched for any chance of seeing Deronda, so that she might inquire about this stranger, under whose measuring gaze she was still wincing. At last her opportunity came.

'Mr Vandernoodt, you know everybody,' said Gwendolen, not too eagerly, rather with a certain languor of utterance which she sometimes gave to her clear soprano. 'Who is that near the door?'

'There are half-a-dozen near the door. Do you mean that old Adonis in the George the Fourth wig?'

'No, no; the dark-haired young man on the right with the dreadful expression.'

'Dreadful, do you call it? I think he is an uncommonly fine fellow.'

'But who is he?'

'He is lately come to our hotel with Sir Hugo Mallinger.'

'Sir Hugo Mallinger?'

'Yes. Do you know him?'

'No.' (Gwendolen coloured slightly.) 'He has a place near us, but he never comes to it. What did you say was the name of that gentleman near the door?'

'Deronda – Mr Deronda.'

'What a delightful name! Is he an Englishman?'

‘Yes. He is reported to be rather closely related to the baronet. You are interested in him?’

‘Yes. I think he is not like young men in general.’

‘And you don’t admire young men in general?’

‘Not in the least. I always know what they will say. I can’t at all guess what this Mr Deronda would say. What *does* he say?’

‘Nothing, chiefly. I sat with his party for a good hour last night on the terrace, and he never spoke – and was not smoking either. He looked bored.’

‘Another reason why I should like to know him. I am always bored.’

‘I should think he would be charmed to have an introduction. Shall I bring it about? Will you allow it, baroness?’

‘Why not? – since he is related to Sir Hugo Mallinger. It is a new *rôle* of yours, Gwendolen, to be always bored,’ continued Madame von Langen, when Mr Vandernoodt had moved away. ‘Until now you have always seemed eager about something from morning till night.’

‘That is just because I am bored to death. If I am to leave off play I must break my arm or my collar-bone. I must make something happen; unless you will go into Switzerland and take me up the Matterhorn.’

‘Perhaps this Mr Deronda’s acquaintance will do instead of the Matterhorn.’

‘Perhaps.’

But Gwendolen did not make Deronda’s acquaintance on this occasion. Mr Vandernoodt did not succeed in bringing him up to her that evening, and when she re-entered her own room she found a letter recalling her home.

Chapter Two

> This man contrives a secret 'twixt us two,
> That he may quell me with his meeting eyes
> Like one who quells a lioness at bay

This was the letter Gwendolen found on her table: –

> Dearest Child, – I have been expecting to hear from you for a week. In your last you said the Langens thought of leaving Leubronn and going to Baden. How could you be so thoughtless as to leave me in uncertainty about your address? I am in the greatest anxiety lest this should not reach you. In any case you were to come home at the end of September, and I must now entreat you to return as quickly as possible, for if you spent all your money it would be out of my power to send you any more, and you must not borrow of the Langens, for I could not repay them. This is the sad truth, my child – I wish I could prepare you for it better – but a dreadful calamity has befallen us all. You know nothing about business and will not understand it; but Grapnell & Co. have failed for a million and we are totally ruined – your aunt Gascoigne as well as I, only that your uncle has his benefice, so that by putting down their carriage and getting interest for the boys, the family can go on. All the property our poor father saved for us goes to pay the liabilities. There is nothing I can call my own. It is better you should know this at once, though it rends my heart to have to tell it you. Of course we cannot help thinking what a pity it was that you went away just when you did. But I shall never reproach you, my dear child; I would save you from all trouble if I could. On your way home you will have time to prepare yourself for the change you will find. We shall perhaps leave Offendene at once, for we hope that Mr Haynes, who wanted it before, may be ready to take it off my hands. Of course we cannot go to the Rectory – there is not a corner there to spare. We must get some hut or other to shelter us, and we must live on your uncle Gascoigne's charity, until I see what else can be done. I shall not be able to pay the debts to the tradesmen besides the servants' wages. Summon up your fortitude, my dear child; we must resign ourselves to God's will. But it is hard to resign one's self to Mr Lassman's wicked recklessness, which they say was the cause of the failure. Your poor sisters can only cry with me and give me no help. If you were once here, there might be a break in the cloud. I always feel it impossible that you can have been meant for poverty. If the Langens wish to remain abroad, perhaps you can put yourself under some one else's care for the journey. But come as soon as you can to your afflicted and loving mamma,
>
> Fanny Davilow

The first effect of this letter on Gwendolen was half stupefying. The implicit confidence that her destiny must be one of luxurious ease, where any trouble that occurred would be well clad and provided for, had been stronger in her own mind than in her mamma's, being fed there by her youthful blood and that sense of superior claims which made a large part of her consciousness. It was almost as difficult for her to believe suddenly that her position had become one of poverty and humiliating dependence, as it would have been to get into the strong current of her blooming life the chill sense that her death would really come. She stood motionless for a few minutes, then tossed off her hat and automatically looked in the glass. The coils of her smooth light-brown hair were still in order perfect enough for a ball-room; and as on other nights, Gwendolen might have looked lingeringly at herself for pleasure (surely an allowable indulgence); but now she took no conscious note of her reflected beauty, and simply stared right before her as if she had been jarred by a hateful sound and was waiting for any sign of its cause. By-and-by she threw herself in the corner of the red velvet sofa, took up the letter again and read it twice deliberately, letting it at last fall on the ground, while she rested her clasped hands on her lap and sat perfectly still, shedding no tears. Her impulse was to survey and resist the situation rather than to wail over it. There was no inward exclamation of 'Poor mamma!' Her mamma had never seemed to get much enjoyment out of life, and if Gwendolen had been at this moment disposed to feel pity she would have bestowed it on herself – for was she not naturally and rightfully the chief object of her mamma's anxiety too? But it was anger, it was resistance that possessed her; it was bitter vexation that she had lost her gains at roulette, whereas if her luck had continued through this one day she would have had a handsome sum to carry home, or she might have gone on playing and won enough to support them all. Even now was it not possible? She had only four napoleons left in her purse, but she possessed some ornaments which she could sell: a practice so common in stylish society at German baths that there was no need to be ashamed of it; and even if she had not received her mamma's letter, she would probably have decided to get money for an Etruscan necklace which she happened not to have been wearing since her arrival; nay, she might have done so with an agreeable sense that she was living with some intensity and escaping humdrum. With ten louis at her disposal and a return of her former luck, which seemed probable, what could she do better than go on playing for a few days? If her friends at home disapproved of the way in which she got the money, as they certainly would, still the money would be there. Gwendolen's imagination dwelt on this course and created agreeable consequences, but not with unbroken confidence and rising certainty as it would have done if she had been touched with the gambler's mania. She had gone to the

roulette-table not because of passion, but in search of it: her mind was still sanely capable of picturing balanced probabilities, and while the chance of winning allured her, the chance of losing thrust itself on her with alternate strength and made a vision from which her pride shrank sensitively. For she was resolved not to tell the Langens that any misfortune had befallen her family, or to make herself in any way indebted to their compassion; and if she were to part with her jewellery to any observable extent, they would interfere by inquiries and remonstrances. The course that held the least risk of intolerable annoyance was to raise money on her necklace early in the morning, tell the Langens that her mamma desired her immediate return without giving a reason, and take the train for Brussels that evening. She had no maid with her, and the Langens might make difficulties about her returning alone, but her will was peremptory.

Instead of going to bed she made as brilliant a light as she could and began to pack, working diligently, though all the while visited by the scenes that might take place on the coming day – now by the tiresome explanations and farewells, and the whirling journey towards a changed home, now by the alternative of staying just another day and standing again at the roulette-table. But always in this latter scene there was the presence of that Deronda, watching her with exasperating irony, and – the two keen experiences were inevitably revived together – beholding her again forsaken by luck. This importunate image certainly helped to sway her resolve on the side of immediate departure, and to urge her packing to the point which would make a change of mind inconvenient. It had struck twelve when she came into her room, and by the time she was assuring herself that she had left out only what was necessary, the faint dawn was stealing through the white blinds and dulling her candles. What was the use of going to bed? Her cold bath was refreshment enough, and she saw that a slight trace of fatigue about the eyes only made her look the more interesting. Before six o'clock she was completely equipped in her grey travelling dress even to her felt hat, for she meant to walk out as soon as she could count on seeing other ladies on their way to the springs. And happening to be seated sideways before the long strip of mirror between her two windows she turned to look at herself, leaning her elbow on the back of the chair in an attitude that might have been chosen for her portrait. It is possible to have a strong self-love without any self-satisfaction, rather with a self-discontent which is the more intense because one's own little core of egoistic sensibility is a supreme care; but Gwendolen knew nothing of such inward strife. She had a *naïve* delight in her fortunate self, which any but the harshest saintliness will have some indulgence for in a girl who had every day seen a pleasant reflection of that self in her friends' flattery as well as in the looking-glass. And even in this beginning of troubles, while for lack of anything else to do she sat gazing at her image in the growing light, her face gathered a complacency gradual as the cheerfulness of the morning. Her beautiful lips curled into a more and more decided smile, till at last she took off her hat, leaned forward and kissed the cold glass which had looked so warm. How could she believe in sorrow? If it attacked her, she felt the force to crush it, to defy it, or run away from it, as she had done already. Anything seemed more possible than that she could go on bearing miseries, great or small.

Madame von Langen never went out before breakfast, so that Gwendolen could safely end her early walk by taking her way homeward through the Obere Strasse in which was the needed shop, sure to be open after seven. At that hour any observers whom she minded would be either on their walks in the region of the springs, or would be still in their bedrooms; but certainly there was one grand hotel, the *Czarina*, from which eyes might follow her up to Mr Wiener's door. This was a chance to be risked: might she not be going in to buy something which had struck her fancy? This implicit falsehood passed through her mind as she remembered that the *Czarina* was Deronda's hotel; but she was then already far up the Obere Strasse, and she walked on with her usual floating movement, every line in her figure and drapery falling in gentle curves attractive to all eyes except those which discerned in them too close a resemblance to the serpent, and objected to the revival of serpent-worship. She looked neither to the right hand nor to the left, and transacted her business in the shop with a coolness which gave little Mr Wiener nothing to remark except her proud grace of manner, and the superior size and quality of the three central turquoises in the necklace she offered him. They had belonged to a chain once her father's; but she had never known her father; and the necklace was in all respects the ornament she could most conveniently part with. Who supposes that it is an impossible contradiction to be superstitious and rationalising at the same time? Roulette encourages a romantic superstition as to the chances of the game, and the most prosaic rationalism as to human sentiments which stand in the way of raising needful money. Gwendolen's dominant regret was that after all she had only nine louis to add to the four in her purse: these Jew dealers were so unscrupulous in taking advantage of Christians unfortunate at play! But she was the Langens' guest in their hired apartment, and had nothing to pay there: thirteen louis would do more than take her home; even if she determined on risking three, the remaining ten would more than suffice, since she meant to travel right on, day and night. As she turned homewards, nay, entered and seated herself in the *salon* to await her friends and breakfast, she still wavered as to her immediate departure, or rather she had concluded to tell the Langens simply that she had had a letter from her mamma desiring her return, and to leave it still undecided when she should start. It was already the usual

breakfast time, and hearing some one enter as she was leaning back rather tired and hungry with her eyes shut, she rose expecting to see one or other of the Langens – the words which might determine her lingering at least another day, ready-formed to pass her lips. But it was the servant bringing in a small packet for Miss Harleth, which had that moment been left at the door. Gwendolen took it in her hand and immediately hurried into her own room. She looked paler and more agitated than when she had first read her mamma's letter. Something – she never quite knew what – revealed to her before she opened the packet that it contained the necklace she had just parted with. Underneath the paper it was wrapt in a cambric handkerchief, and within this was a scrap of torn-off note-paper, on which was written with a pencil in clear but rapid handwriting – '*A stranger who has found Miss Harleth's necklace returns it to her with the hope that she will not again risk the loss of it.*'

Gwendolen reddened with the vexation of wounded pride. A large corner of the handkerchief seemed to have been recklessly torn off to get rid of a mark; but she at once believed in the first image of 'the stranger' that presented itself to her mind. It was Deronda; he must have seen her go into the shop; he must have gone in immediately after, and repurchased the necklace. He had taken an unpardonable liberty, and had dared to place her in a thoroughly hateful position. What could she do? – Not, assuredly, act on her conviction that it was he who had sent her the necklace and straightway send it back to him: that would be to face the possibility that she had been mistaken; nay, even if the 'stranger' were he and no other, it would be something too gross for her to let him know that she had divined this, and to meet him again with that recognition in their minds. He knew very well that he was entangling her in helpless humiliation: it was another way of smiling at her ironically, and taking the air of a supercilious mentor. Gwendolen felt the bitter tears of mortification rising and rolling down her cheeks. No one had ever before dared to treat her with irony and contempt. One thing was clear: she must carry out her resolution to quit this place at once; it was impossible for her to reappear in the public *salon*, still less stand at the gaming-table with the risk of seeing Deronda. Now came an importunate knock at the door: breakfast was ready. Gwendolen with a passionate movement thrust necklace, cambric, scrap of paper, and all into her *nécessaire*, pressed her handkerchief against her face, and after pausing a minute or two to summon back her proud self-control, went to join her friends. Such signs of tears and fatigue as were left seemed accordant enough with the account she at once gave of her having been called home, for some reason which she feared might be a trouble of her mamma's; and of her having sat up to do her packing, instead of waiting for help from her friend's maid. There was much protestation, as she had expected, against her travelling alone, but she persisted in refusing any arrangements for companionship. She would be put into the ladies' compartment and go right on. She could rest exceedingly well in the train, and was afraid of nothing.

In this way it happened that Gwendolen never reappeared at the roulette-table, but that Thursday evening left Leubronn for Brussels, and on Saturday morning arrived at Offendene, the home to which she and her family were soon to say a last good-bye.

Chapter Three

'Let no flower of the spring pass by us: let us crown ourselves with rosebuds before they be withered.'

– BOOK OF WISDOM

Pity that Offendene was not the home of Miss Harleth's childhood, or endeared to her by family memories! A human life, I think, should be well rooted in some spot of a native land, where it may get the love of tender kinship for the face of earth, for the labours men go forth to, for the sounds and accents that haunt it, for whatever will give that early home a familiar unmistakable difference amidst the future widening of knowledge: a spot where the definiteness of early memories may be inwrought with affection, and kindly acquaintance with all neighbours, even to the dogs and donkeys, may spread not by sentimental effort and reflection, but as a sweet habit of the blood. At five years old, mortals are not prepared to be citizens of the world, to be stimulated by abstract nouns, to soar above preference into impartiality; and that prejudice in favour of milk with which we blindly begin, is a type of the way body and soul must get nourished at least for a time. The best introduction to astronomy is to think of the nightly heavens as a little lot of stars belonging to one's own homestead.

But this blessed persistence in which affection can take root had been wanting in Gwendolen's life. It was only a year before her recall from Leubronn that Offendene had been chosen as her mamma's home, simply for its nearness to Pennicote Rectory, and that Mrs Davilow, Gwendolen, and her four half-sisters (the governess and the maid following in another vehicle) had been driven along the avenue for the first time, on a late October afternoon when the rooks were cawing loudly above them, and the yellow elm-leaves were whirling.

The season suited the aspect of the old oblong red-brick house, rather too anxiously ornamented with stone at every line, not excepting the double row of narrow windows and the large square portico. The stone encouraged a greenish lichen, the brick a powdery grey, so that though the building was rigidly rectangular there was no harshness in the physiognomy which it turned to the three avenues cut east, west, and south in the hundred yards' breadth of old plantation encircling the immediate grounds. One would have liked the house to have been lifted on a knoll, so as to look beyond its own little domain to the long thatched roofs of the distant villages, the church towers, the scattered homesteads, the gradual rise of surging woods, and the green breadths of undulating park which made the beautiful face of the earth in that part of Wessex. But though standing thus behind a screen amid flat pastures, it had on one side a glimpse of the wider world in the lofty curves of the chalk downs, grand steadfast forms played over by the changing days.

The house was but just large enough to be called a mansion, and was moderately rented, having no manor attached to it, and being rather difficult to let with its sombre furniture and faded upholstery. But inside and outside it was what no beholder could suppose to be inhabited by retired tradespeople: a certainty which was worth many conveniences to tenants who not only had the taste that shrinks from new finery, but also were in that border-territory of rank where annexation is a burning topic; and to take up her abode in a house which had once sufficed for dowager countesses gave a perceptible tinge to Mrs Davilow's satisfaction in having an establishment of her own. This, rather mysteriously to Gwendolen, appeared suddenly possible on the death of her step-father Captain Davilow, who had for the last nine years joined his family only in a brief and fitful manner, enough to reconcile them to his long absences; but she cared much more for the fact than for the explanation. All her prospects had become more agreeable in consequence. She had disliked their former way of life, roving from one foreign watering-place or Parisian apartment to another, always feeling new antipathies to new suites of hired furniture, and meeting new people under conditions which made her appear of little importance; and the variation of having passed two years at a showy school, where on all occasions of display she had been put foremost, had only deepened her sense that so exceptional a person as herself could hardly remain in ordinary circumstances or in a social position less than advantageous. Any fear of this latter evil was banished now that her mamma was to have an establishment; for on the point of birth Gwendolen was quite easy. She had no notion how her maternal grandfather got the fortune inherited by his two daughters; but he had been a West Indian – which seemed to exclude further question; and she knew that her father's family was so high as to take no notice of her mamma, who nevertheless preserved with much pride

the miniature of a Lady Molly in that connection. She would probably have known much more about her father but for a little incident which happened when she was twelve years old. Mrs Davilow had brought out, as she did only at wide intervals, various memorials of her first husband, and while showing his miniature to Gwendolen recalled with a fervour which seemed to count on a peculiar filial sympathy, the fact that dear papa had died when his little daughter was in long clothes. Gwendolen, immediately thinking of the unlovable step-father whom she had been acquainted with the greater part of her life while her frocks were short, said –

'Why did you marry again, mamma? It would have been nicer if you had not.'

Mrs Davilow coloured deeply, a slight convulsive movement passed over her face, and straightway shutting up the memorials she said, with a violence quite unusual in her –

'You have no feeling, child!'

Gwendolen, who was fond of her mamma, felt hurt and ashamed, and had never since dared to ask a question about her father.

This was not the only instance in which she had brought on herself the pain of some filial compunction. It was always arranged, when possible, that she should have a small bed in her mamma's room; for Mrs Davilow's motherly tenderness clung chiefly to her eldest girl, who had been born in her happier time. One night under an attack of pain she found that the specific regularly placed by her bedside had been forgotten, and begged Gwendolen to get out of bed and reach it for her. That healthy young lady, snug and warm as a rosy infant in her little couch, objected to step out into the cold, and lying perfectly still, grumbled a refusal. Mrs Davilow went without the medicine and never reproached her daughter; but the next day Gwendolen was keenly conscious of what must be in her mamma's mind, and tried to make amends by caresses which cost her no effort. Having always been the pet and pride of the household, waited on by mother, sisters, governess, and maids, as if she had been a princess in exile, she naturally found it difficult to think her own pleasure less important than others made it, and when it was positively thwarted felt an astonished resentment apt, in her cruder days, to vent itself in one of those passionate acts which look like a contradiction of habitual tendencies. Though never even as a child thoughtlessly cruel, nay, delighting to rescue drowning insects and watch their recovery, there was a disagreeable silent remembrance of her having strangled her sister's canary-bird in a final fit of exasperation at its shrill singing which had again and again jarringly interrupted her own. She had taken pains to buy a white mouse for her sister in retribution, and though inwardly excusing herself on the ground of a peculiar sensitiveness which was a mark of her general superiority, the thought of that infelonious murder had always made her wince. Gwendolen's nature was not remorseless, but she liked to make her penances easy, and now that she was twenty and more, some of her native force had turned into a self-control by which she guarded herself from penitential humiliation. There was more show of fire and will in her than ever, but there was more calculation underneath it.

On this day of arrival at Offendene, which not even Mrs Davilow had seen before – the place having been taken for her by her brother-in-law Mr Gascoigne – when all had got down from the carriage, and were standing under the porch in front of the open door, so that they could have both a general view of the place and a glimpse of the stone hall and staircase hung with sombre pictures, but enlivened by a bright wood fire, no one spoke: mamma, the four sisters, and the governess all looked at Gwendolen, as if their feelings depended entirely on her decision. Of the girls, from Alice in her sixteenth year to Isabel in her tenth, hardly anything could be said on a first view, but that they were girlish, and that their black dresses were getting shabby. Miss Merry was elderly and altogether neutral in expression. Mrs Davilow's worn beauty seemed the more pathetic for the look of entire appeal which she cast at Gwendolen, who was glancing round at the house, the landscape, and the entrance-hall with an air of rapid judgment. Imagine a young racehorse in the paddock among untrimmed ponies and patient hacks.

'Well, dear, what do you think of the place?' said Mrs Davilow at last, in a gentle deprecatory tone.

'I think it is charming,' said Gwendolen, quickly. 'A romantic place; anything delightful may happen in it; it would be a good background for anything. No one need be ashamed of living here.'

'There is certainly nothing common about it.'

'Oh, it would do for fallen royalty or any sort of grand poverty. We ought properly to have been living in splendour, and have come down to this. It would have been as romantic as could be. But I thought my uncle and aunt Gascoigne would be here to meet us, and my cousin Anna,' added Gwendolen, her tone changed to sharp surprise.

'We are early,' said Mrs Davilow; and entering the hall, she said to the housekeeper who came forward, 'You expect Mr and Mrs Gascoigne?'

'Yes, madam: they were here yesterday to give particular orders about the fires and the dinner. But as to fires, I've had 'em in all the rooms for the last week, and everything is well aired. I could wish some of the furniture paid better for all the cleaning it's had, but I *think* you'll see the brasses have been done justice to. I *think* when Mr and Mrs Gascoigne come, they'll tell you nothing's been neglected. They'll be here at five, for

certain.'

This satisfied Gwendolen, who was not prepared to have their arrival treated with indifference; and after tripping a little way up the matted stone staircase to take a survey there, she tripped down again, and followed by all the girls looked into each of the rooms opening from the hall – the dining-room all dark oak and worn red satin damask, with a copy of snarling, worrying dogs from Snyders over the sideboard, and a Christ breaking bread over the mantelpiece; the library with a general aspect and smell of old brown leather; and lastly, the drawing-room, which was entered through a small antechamber crowded with venerable knick-knacks.

'Mamma, mamma, pray come here!' said Gwendolen, Mrs Davilow having followed slowly in talk with the housekeeper. 'Here is an organ. I will be Saint Cecilia: some one shall paint me as Saint Cecilia. Jocosa (this was her name for Miss Merry), let down my hair. See, mamma!'

She had thrown off her hat and gloves, and seated herself before the organ in an admirable pose, looking upward; while the submissive and sad Jocosa took out the one comb which fastened the coil of hair, and then shook out the mass till it fell in a smooth light-brown stream far below its owner's slim waist.

Mrs Davilow smiled and said, 'A charming picture, my dear!' not indifferent to the display of her pet, even in the presence of a housekeeper. Gwendolen rose and laughed with delight. All this seemed quite to the purpose on entering a new house which was so excellent a background.

'What a queer, quaint, picturesque room!' she went on, looking about her. 'I like these old embroidered chairs, and the garlands on the wainscot, and the pictures that may be anything. That one with the ribs – nothing but ribs and darkness – I should think that is Spanish, mamma.'

'Oh *Gwendolen*!' said the small Isabel, in a tone of astonishment, while she held open a hinged panel of the wainscot at the other end of the room.

Every one, Gwendolen first, went to look. The opened panel had disclosed the picture of an upturned dead face, from which an obscure figure seemed to be fleeing with outstretched arms. 'How horrible!' said Mrs Davilow, with a look of mere disgust; but Gwendolen shuddered silently, and Isabel, a plain and altogether inconvenient child with an alarming memory, said –

'You will never stay in this room by yourself, Gwendolen.'

'How dare you open things which were meant to be shut up, you perverse little creature?' said Gwendolen, in her angriest tone. Then snatching the panel out of the hand of the culprit, she closed it hastily, saying, 'There is a lock – where is the key? Let the key be found, or else let one be made, and let nobody open it again; or rather, let the key be brought to me.'

At this command to everybody in general Gwendolen turned with a face which was flushed in reaction from her chill shudder, and said, 'Let us go up to our own room, mamma.'

The housekeeper on searching found the key in the drawer of a cabinet close by the panel, and presently handed it to Bugle, the lady's-maid, telling her significantly to give it to her Royal Highness.

'I don't know who you mean, Mrs Startin,' said Bugle, who had been busy up-stairs during the scene in the drawing-room, and was rather offended at this irony in a new servant.

'I mean the young lady that's to command us all – and well worthy for looks and figure,' replied Mrs Startin in propitiation. 'She'll know what key it is.'

'If you have laid out what we want, go and see to the others, Bugle,' Gwendolen had said, when she and Mrs Davilow entered their black and yellow bedroom, where a pretty little white couch was prepared by the side of the black and yellow catafalque known as 'the best bed.' 'I will help mamma.'

But her first movement was to go to the tall mirror between the windows, which reflected herself and the room completely, while her mamma sat down and also looked at the reflection.

'That is a becoming glass, Gwendolen; or is it the black and gold colour that sets you off?' said Mrs Davilow, as Gwendolen stood obliquely with her three-quarter face turned towards the mirror, and her left hand brushing back the stream of hair.

'I should make a tolerable Saint Cecilia with some white roses on my head,' said Gwendolen, – 'only, how about my nose, mamma? I think saints' noses never in the least turn up. I wish you had given me your perfectly straight nose; it would have done for any sort of character – a nose of all work. Mine is only a happy nose; it would not do so well for tragedy.'

'Oh, my dear, any nose will do to be miserable with in this world,' said Mrs Davilow, with a deep, weary sigh, throwing her black bonnet on the table, and resting her elbow near it.

'Now, mamma,' said Gwendolen, in a strongly remonstrant tone, turning away from the glass with an air of vexation, 'don't begin to be dull here. It spoils all my pleasure, and everything may be so happy now. What have you to be gloomy about *now*?'

'Nothing, dear,' said Mrs Davilow, seeming to rouse herself, and beginning to take off her dress. 'It is always enough for me to see you happy.'

‘But you should be happy yourself,’ said Gwendolen, still discontentedly, though going to help her mamma with caressing touches. ‘Can nobody be happy after they are quite young? You have made me feel sometimes as if nothing were of any use. With the girls so troublesome, and Jocosa so dreadfully wooden and ugly, and everything make-shift about us, and you looking so dull – what was the use of my being anything? But now you *might* be happy.’

‘So I shall, dear,’ said Mrs Davilow, patting the cheek that was bending near her.

‘Yes, but really. Not with a sort of make-believe,’ said Gwendolen, with resolute perseverance. ‘See what a hand and arm! – much more beautiful than mine. Any one can see you were altogether more beautiful.’

‘No, no, dear; I was always heavier. Never half so charming as you are.’

‘Well, but what is the use of my being charming, if it is to end in my being dull and not minding anything? Is that what marriage always comes to?’

‘No, child, certainly not. Marriage is the only happy state for a woman, as I trust you will prove.’

‘I will not put up with it if it is not a happy state. I am determined to be happy – at least not to go on muddling away my life as other people do, being and doing nothing remarkable. I have made up my mind not to let other people interfere with me as they have done. Here is some warm water ready for you, mamma,’ Gwendolen ended, proceeding to take off her own dress and then waiting to have her hair wound up by her mamma.

There was silence for a minute or two, till Mrs Davilow said, while coiling the daughter’s hair, ‘I am sure I have never crossed you, Gwendolen.’

‘You often want me to do what I don’t like.’

‘You mean, to give Alice lessons?’

‘Yes. And I have done it because you asked me. But I don’t see why I should, else. It bores me to death, she is so slow. She has no ear for music, or language, or anything else. It would be much better for her to be ignorant, mamma: it is her *rôle*, she would do it well.’

‘That is a hard thing to say of your poor sister, Gwendolen, who is so good to you, and waits on you hand and foot.’

‘I don’t see why it is hard to call things by their right names, and put them in their proper places. The hardship is for me to have to waste my time on her. Now let me fasten up your hair, mamma.’

‘We must make haste; your uncle and aunt will be here soon. For heaven’s sake, don’t be scornful to *them*, my dear child! or to your cousin Anna, whom you will always be going out with. Do promise me, Gwendolen. You know, you can’t expect Anna to be equal to you.’

‘I don’t want her to be equal,’ said Gwendolen, with a toss of her head and a smile, and the discussion ended there.

When Mr and Mrs Gascoigne and their daughter came, Gwendolen, far from being scornful, behaved as prettily as possible to them. She was introducing herself anew to relatives who had not seen her since the comparatively unfinished age of sixteen, and she was anxious – no, not anxious, but resolved that they should admire her.

Mrs Gascoigne bore a family likeness to her sister. But she was darker and slighter, her face was unworn by grief, her movements were less languid, her expression more alert and critical as that of a rector’s wife bound to exert a beneficent authority. Their closest resemblance lay in a non-resistant disposition, inclined to imitation and obedience; but this, owing to the difference in their circumstances, had led them to very different issues. The younger sister had been indiscreet, or at least unfortunate in her marriages; the elder believed herself the most enviable of wives, and her pliancy had ended in her sometimes taking shapes of surprising definiteness. Many of her opinions, such as those on church government and the character of Archbishop Laud, seemed too decided under every alteration to have been arrived at otherwise than by a wifely receptiveness. And there was much to encourage trust in her husband’s authority. He had some agreeable virtues, some striking advantages, and the failings that were imputed to him all leaned toward the side of success.

One of his advantages was a fine person, which perhaps was even more impressive at fifty-seven than it had been earlier in life. There were no distinctively clerical lines in the face, no official reserve or ostentatious benignity of expression, no tricks of starchiness or of affected ease: in his Inverness cape he could not have been identified except as a gentleman with handsome dark features, a nose which began with an intention to be aquiline but suddenly became straight, and iron-grey hair. Perhaps he owed this freedom from the sort of professional make-up which penetrates skin tones and gestures and defies all drapery, to the fact that he had once been Captain Gaskin, having taken orders and a diphthong but shortly before his engagement to Miss Armyn. If anyone had objected that his preparation for the clerical function was inadequate, his friends might have asked who made a better figure in it, who preached better or had more authority in his parish? He had a native gift for administration, being tolerant both of opinions and conduct, because he felt himself able to

overrule them, and was free from the irritations of conscious feebleness. He smiled pleasantly at the foible of a taste which he did not share – at floriculture or antiquarianism for example, which were much in vogue among his fellow-clergymen in the diocese: for himself, he preferred following the history of a campaign, Or divining from his knowledge of Nesselrode's motives what would have been his conduct if our cabinet had taken a different course. Mr Gascoigne's tone of thinking after some long-quieted fluctuations had become ecclesiastical rather than theological; not the modern Anglican, but what he would have called sound English, free from nonsense: such as became a man who looked at a national religion by daylight, and saw it in its relations to other things. No clerical magistrate had greater weight at sessions, or less of mischievous impracticableness in relation to worldly affairs. Indeed, the worst imputation thrown out against him was worldliness: it could not be proved that he forsook the less fortunate, but it was not to be denied that the friendships he cultivated were of a kind likely to be useful to the father of six sons and two daughters; and bitter observers – for in Wessex, say ten years ago, there were persons whose bitterness may now seem incredible – remarked that the colour of his opinions had changed in consistency with this principle of action. But cheerful, successful worldliness has a false air of being more selfish than the acrid, unsuccessful kind, whose secret history is summed up in the terrible words, 'Sold but not paid for.'

Gwendolen wondered that she had not better remembered how very fine a man her uncle was; but at the age of sixteen she was a less capable and more indifferent judge. At present it was a matter of extreme interest to her that she was to have the near countenance of a dignified male relative, and that the family life would cease to be entirely, insipidly feminine. She did not intend that her uncle should control her, but she saw at once that it would be altogether agreeable to her that he should be proud of introducing her as his niece. And there was every sign of his being likely to feel that pride. He certainly looked at her with admiration as he said –

'You have outgrown Anna, my dear,' putting his arm tenderly round his daughter, whose shy face was a tiny copy of his own, and drawing her forward. 'She is not so old as you by a year, but her growing days are certainly over. I hope you will be excellent companions.'

He did give a comparing glance at his daughter, but if he saw her inferiority, he might also see that Anna's timid appearance and miniature figure must appeal to a different taste from that which was attracted by Gwendolen, and that the girls could hardly be rivals. Gwendolen, at least, was aware of this, and kissed her cousin with real cordiality as well as grace, saying, 'A companion is just what I want. I am so glad we are come to live here. And mamma will be much happier now she is near you, aunt.'

The aunt trusted indeed that it would be so, and felt it a blessing that a suitable home had been vacant in their uncle's parish. Then, of course, notice had to be taken of the four other girls whom Gwendolen had always felt to be superfluous: all of a girlish average that made four units utterly unimportant, and yet from her earliest days an obtrusive influential fact in her life. She was conscious of having been much kinder to them than could have been expected. And it was evident to her that her uncle and aunt also felt it a pity there were so many girls: – what rational person could feel otherwise, except poor mamma, who never would see how Alice set up her shoulders and lifted her eyebrows till she had no forehead left, how Bertha and Fanny whispered and tittered together about everything, or how Isabel was always listening and staring and forgetting where she was, and treading on the toes of her suffering elders?

'You have brothers, Anna,' said Gwendolen, while the sisters were being noticed. 'I think you are enviable there.'

'Yes,' said Anna, simply. 'I am very fond of them; but of course their education is a great anxiety to papa. He used to say they made me a tomboy. I really was a great romp with Rex. I think you will like Rex. He will come home before Christmas.'

'I remember I used to think you rather wild and shy; but it is difficult now to imagine you a romp,' said Gwendolen, smiling.

'Of course I am altered now; I am come out, and all that. But in reality I like to go black-berrying with Edwy and Lotta as well as ever. I am not very fond of going out; but I daresay I shall like it better now you will be often with me. I am not at all clever, and I never know what to say. It seems so useless to say what everybody knows, and I can think of nothing else, except what papa says.'

'I shall like going out with you very much,' said Gwendolen, well disposed towards this *naïve* cousin 'Are you fond of riding?'

'Yes, but we have only one Shetland pony amongst us. Papa says he can't afford more, besides the carriage-horses and his own nag; he has so many expenses.'

'I intend to have a horse and ride a great deal now,' said Gwendolen, in a tone of decision. 'Is the society pleasant in this neighbourhood?'

'Papa says it is, very. There are the clergymen all about, you know; and the Quallons and the Arrowpoints, and Lord Brackenshaw, and Sir Hugo Mallinger's place, where there is nobody – that's very nice, because we

make picnics there – and two or three families at Wanchester; oh, and old Mrs Vulcany at Nuttingwood, and —'

But Anna was relieved of this tax on her descriptive powers by the announcement of dinner, and Gwendolen's question was soon indirectly answered by her uncle, who dwelt much on the advantages he had secured for them in getting a place like Offendene. Except the rent, it involved no more expense than an ordinary house at Wanchester would have done.

'And it is always worth while to make a little sacrifice for a good style of house,' said Mr Gascoigne in his easy, pleasantly confident tone, which made the world in general seem a very manageable place of residence; 'especially where there is only a lady at the head. All the best people will call upon you; and you need give no expensive dinners. Of course I have to spend a good deal in that way; it is a large item. But then I get my house for nothing. If I had to pay three hundred a-year for my house I could not keep a table. My boys are too great a drain on me. You are better off than we are, in proportion; there is no great drain on you now, after your house and carriage.'

'I assure you, Fanny, now the children are growing up, I am obliged to cut and contrive,' said Mrs Gascoigne. 'I am not a good manager by nature, but Henry has taught me. He is wonderful for making the best of everything; he allows himself no extras, and gets his curates for nothing. It is rather hard that he has not been made a prebendary or something, as others have been, considering the friends he has made, and the need there is for men of moderate opinions in all respects. If the Church is to keep its position, ability and character ought to tell.'

'Oh, my dear Nancy, you forget the old story – thank Heaven, there are three hundred as good as I. And ultimately we shall have no reason to complain, I am pretty sure. There could hardly be a more thorough friend than Lord Brackenshaw – your landlord, you know, Fanny. Lady Brackenshaw will call upon you. And I have spoken for Gwendolen to be a member of our Archery Club – the Brackenshaw Archery Club – the most select thing anywhere. That is, if she has no objection,' added Mr Gascoigne, looking at Gwendolen with pleasant irony.

'I should like it of all things,' said Gwendolen. 'There is nothing I enjoy more than taking aim – and hitting,' she ended, with a pretty nod and smile.

'Our Anna, poor child, is too short-sighted for archery. But I consider myself a first-rate shot, and you shall practise with me. I must make you an accomplished archer before our great meeting in July. In fact, as to neighbourhood, you could hardly be better placed. There are the Arrowpoints – they are some of our best people. Miss Arrowpoint is a delightful girl: – she has been presented at Court. They have a magnificent place – Quetcham Hall – worth seeing in point of art; and their parties, to which you are sure to be invited, are the best things of the sort we have. The archdeacon is intimate there, and they have always a good kind of people staying in the house. Mrs Arrowpoint is peculiar, certainly; something of a caricature, in fact; but well-meaning. And Miss Arrowpoint is as nice as possible. It is not all young ladies who have mothers as handsome and graceful as yours and Anna's.'

Mrs Davilow smiled faintly at this little compliment, but the husband and wife looked affectionately at each other, and Gwendolen thought, 'My uncle and aunt, at least, are happy: they are not dull and dismal.' Altogether, she felt satisfied with her prospects at Offendene, as a great improvement on anything she had known. Even the cheap curates, she incidentally learned, were almost always young men of family, and Mr Middleton, the actual curate, was said to be quite an acquisition: it was only a pity he was so soon to leave.

But there was one point which she was so anxious to gain that she could not allow the evening to pass without taking her measures towards securing it. Her mamma, she knew, intended to submit entirely to her uncle's judgment with regard to expenditure; and the submission was not merely prudential, for Mrs Davilow, conscious that she had always been seen under a cloud as poor dear Fanny, who had made a sad blunder with her second marriage, felt a hearty satisfaction in being frankly and cordially identified with her sister's family, and in having her affairs canvassed and managed with an authority which presupposed a genuine interest. Thus the question of a suitable saddle-horse, which had been sufficiently discussed with mamma, had to be referred to Mr Gascoigne; and after Gwendolen had played on the piano, which had been provided from Wanchester, had sung to her hearers' admiration, and had induced her uncle to join her in a duet – what more softening influence than this on any uncle who would have sung finely if his time had not been too much taken up by graver matters? – she seized the opportune moment for saying, 'Mamma, you have not spoken to my uncle about my riding.'

'Gwendolen desires above all things to have a horse to ride – a pretty, light, lady's horse,' said Mrs Davilow, looking at Mr Gascoigne. 'Do you think we can manage it?'

Mr Gascoigne projected his lower lip and lifted his handsome eyebrows sarcastically at Gwendolen, who had seated herself with much grace on the elbow of her mamma's chair.

'We could lend her the pony sometimes,' said Mrs Gascoigne, watching her husband's face, and feeling quite

ready to disapprove if he did.

'That might be inconveniencing others, aunt, and would be no pleasure to me. I cannot endure ponies,' said Gwendolen. 'I would rather give up some other indulgence and have a horse.' (Was there ever a young lady or gentleman not ready to give up an unspecified indulgence for the sake of the favourite one specified?)

'She rides so well. She has had lessons, and the riding-master said she had so good a seat and hand she might be trusted with any mount,' said Mrs Davilow, who, even if she had not wished her darling to have the horse, would not have dared to be lukewarm in trying to get it for her.

'There is the price of the horse – a good sixty with the best chance, and then his keep,' said Mr Gascoigne, in a tone which, though demurring, betrayed the inward presence of something that favoured the demand. 'There are the carriage-horses – already a heavy item. And remember what you ladies cost in toilet now.'

'I really wear nothing but two black dresses,' said Mrs Davilow, hastily. 'And the younger girls, of course, require no toilet at present. Besides, Gwendolen will save me so much by giving her sisters lessons.' Here Mrs Davilow's delicate cheek showed a rapid blush. 'If it were not for that, I must really have a more expensive governess, and masters besides.'

Gwendolen felt some anger with her mamma, but carefully concealed it.

'That is good – that is decidedly good,' said Mr Gascoigne, heartily, looking at his wife. And Gwendolen, who, it must be owned, was a deep young lady, suddenly moved away to the other end of the long drawing-room, and busied herself with arranging pieces of music.

'The dear child has had no indulgences, no pleasures,' said Mrs Davilow, in a pleading undertone. 'I feel the expense is rather imprudent in this first year of our settling. But she really needs the exercise – she needs cheering. And if you were to see her on horseback, it *is* something splendid.'

'It is what we could not afford for Anna,' said Mrs Gascoigne. 'But she, dear child, would ride Lotta's donkey, and think it good enough.' (Anna was absorbed in a game with Isabel, who had hunted out an old backgammon-board, and had begged to sit up an extra hour.)

'Certainly, a fine woman never looks better than on horseback,' said Mr Gascoigne. 'And Gwendolen has the figure for it. I don't say the thing should not be considered.'

'We might try it for a time, at all events. It can be given up, if necessary,' said Mrs Davilow.

'Well, I will consult Lord Brackenshaw's head groom. He is my *fidus Achates* in the horsey way.'

'Thanks,' said Mrs Davilow, much relieved. 'You are very kind.'

'That he always is,' said Mrs Gascoigne. And later that night, when she and her husband were in private, she said –

'I thought you were almost too indulgent about the horse for Gwendolen. She ought not to claim so much more than your own daughter would think of. Especially before we see how Fanny manages on her income. And you really have enough to do without taking all this trouble on yourself.'

'My dear Nancy, one must look at things from every point of view. This girl is really worth some expense: you don't often see her equal. She ought to make a first-rate marriage, and I should not be doing my duty if I spared my trouble in helping her forward. You know yourself she has been under a disadvantage with such a father-in-law, and a second family, keeping her always in the shade. I feel for the girl. And I should like your sister and her family now to have the benefit of your having married rather a better specimen of our kind than she did.'

'Rather better! I should think so. However, it is for me to be grateful that you will take so much on your shoulders for the sake of my sister and her children. I am sure I would not grudge anything to poor Fanny. But there is one thing I have been thinking of, though you have never mentioned it.'

'What is that?'

'The boys. I hope they will not be falling in love with Gwendolen.'

'Don't presuppose anything of the kind, my dear, and there will be no danger. Rex will never be at home for long together, and Warham is going to India. It is the wiser plan to take it for granted that cousins will not fall in love. If you begin with precautions, the affair will come in spite of them. One must not undertake to act for Providence in these matters, which can no more be held under the hand than a brood of chickens. The boys will have nothing, and Gwendolen will have nothing. They can't marry. At the worst there would only be a little crying, and you can't save boys and girls from that.'

Mrs Gascoigne's mind was satisfied: if anything did happen, there was the comfort of feeling that her husband would know what was to be done, and would have the energy to do it.

Chapter Four

Gorgibus. – … Je te dis que le manage est une chose sainte et sacrée, et que c'est faire en honnêtes gens, que de débuter par là.

Madelon. – Mon Dieu! que si tout le monde vous ressemblait, un roman serait bientôt fini! La belle chose que ce serait, si d'abord Cyrus épousait Mandane, et qu'Aronce de plain-pied fût marié à Clélie! … Laissez-nous faire à loisir le tissu de notre roman, et n'en pressez pas tant la conclusion.

– MOLIÈRE: *Les Précieuses Ridicules*[1]

It would be a little hard to blame the Rector of Pennicote that in the course of looking at things from every point of view, he looked at Gwendolen as a girl likely to make a brilliant marriage. Why should he be expected to differ from his contemporaries in this matter, and wish his niece a worse end of her charming maidenhood than they would approve as the best possible? It is rather to be set down to his credit that his feelings on the subject were entirely good-natured. And in considering the relation of means to ends, it would have been mere folly to have been guided by the exceptional and idyllic – to have recommended that Gwendolen should wear a gown as shabby as Griselda's in order that a marquis might fall in love with her, or to have insisted that since a fair maiden was to be sought, she should keep herself out of the way. Mr Gascoigne's calculations were of the kind called rational, and he did not even think of getting a too frisky horse in order that Gwendolen might be threatened with an accident and be rescued by a man of property. He wished his niece well, and he meant her to be seen to advantage in the best society of the neighbourhood.

Her uncle's intention fell in perfectly with Gwendolen's own wishes. But let no one suppose that she also contemplated a brilliant marriage as the direct end of her witching the world with her grace on horseback, or with any other accomplishment. That she was to be married some time or other she would have felt obliged to admit; and that her marriage would not be of a middling kind, such as most girls were contented with, she felt quietly, unargumentatively sure. But her thoughts never dwelt on marriage as the fulfilment of her ambition; the dramas in which she imagined herself a heroine were not wrought up to that close. To be very much sued or hopelessly sighed for as a bride was indeed an indispensable and agreeable guarantee of womanly power; but to become a wife and wear all the domestic fetters of that condition, was on the whole a vexatious necessity. Her observation of matrimony had inclined her to think it rather a dreary state, in which a woman could not do what she liked, had more children than were desirable, was consequently dull, and became irrevocably immersed in humdrum. Of course marriage was social promotion; she could not look forward to a single life; but promotions have sometimes to be taken with bitter herbs – a peerage will not quite do instead of leadership to the man who meant to lead; and this delicate-limbed sylph of twenty meant to lead. For such passions dwell in feminine breasts also. In Gwendolen's, however, they dwelt among strictly feminine furniture, and had no disturbing reference to the advancement of learning or the balance of the constitution; her knowledge being such as with no sort of standing-room or length of lever could have been expected to move the world. She meant to do what was pleasant to herself in a striking manner; or rather, whatever she could do so as to strike others with admiration and get in that reflected way a more ardent sense of living, seemed pleasant to her fancy.

'Gwendolen will not rest without having the world at her feet,' said Miss Merry, the meek governess: – hyperbolical words which have long come to carry the most moderate meanings; for who has not heard of private persons having the world at their feet in the shape of some half-dozen items of flattering regard generally known in a genteel suburb? And words could hardly be too wide or vague to indicate the prospect that made a hazy largeness about poor Gwendolen on the heights of her young self-exultation. Other people allowed themselves to be made slaves of, and to have their lives blown hither and thither like empty ships in which no will was present: it was not to be so with her, she would no longer be sacrificed to creatures worth less than herself, but would make the very best of the chances that life offered her, and conquer circumstance by her exceptional cleverness. Certainly, to be settled at Offendene, with the notice of Lady Brackenshaw, the archery club, and invitations to dine with the Arrowpoints, as the highest lights in her scenery, was not a position that seemed to offer remarkable chances; but Gwendolen's confidence lay chiefly in herself. She felt well equipped for the mastery of life. With regard to much in her lot hitherto, she held herself rather hardly dealt with, but as to her 'education' she would have admitted that it had left her under no disadvantages. In

the schoolroom her quick mind had taken readily that strong starch of unexplained rules and disconnected facts which saves ignorance from any painful sense of limpness; and what remained of all things knowable, she was conscious of being sufficiently acquainted with through novels, plays, and poems. About her French and music, the two justifying accomplishments of a young lady, she felt no ground for uneasiness; and when to all these qualifications, negative and positive, we add the spontaneous sense of capability some happy persons are born with, so that any subject they turn attention to impresses them with their own power of forming a correct judgment on it, who can wonder if Gwendolen felt ready to manage her own destiny?

There were many subjects in the world – perhaps the majority – in which she felt no interest, because they were stupid; for subjects are apt to appear stupid to the young as light seems dim to the old; but she would not have felt at all helpless in relation to them if they had turned up in conversation. It must be remembered that no one had disputed her power or her general superiority. As on the arrival at Offendene, so always, the first thought of those about her had been, what will Gwendolen think? – if the footman trod heavily in creaking boots or if the laundress's work was unsatisfactory, the maid said, 'This will never do for Miss Harleth;' if the wood smoked in the bedroom fireplace, Mrs Davilow, whose own weak eyes suffered much from this inconvenience, spoke apologetically of it to Gwendolen. If, when they were under the stress of travelling, she did not appear at the breakfast-table till every one else had finished, the only question was, how Gwendolen's coffee and toast should still be of the hottest and crispest; and when she appeared with her freshly-brushed light-brown hair streaming backward and awaiting her mamma's hand to coil it up, her long brown eyes glancing bright as a wave-washed onyx from under their long lashes, it was always she herself who had to be tolerant – to beg that Alice who sat waiting on her would not stick up her shoulders in that frightful manner, and that Isabel instead of pushing up to her and asking questions would go away to Miss Merry.

Always she was the princess in exile, who in time of famine was to have her breakfast-roll made of the finest-bolted flour from the seven thin ears of wheat, and in a general decampment was to have her silver fork kept out of the baggage. How was this to be accounted for? The answer may seem to lie quite on the surface: – in her beauty, a certain unusualness about her, a decision of will which made itself felt in her graceful movements and clear unhesitating tones, so that if she came into the room on a rainy day when everybody else was flaccid and the use of things in general was not apparent to them, there seemed to be a sudden, sufficient reason for keeping up the forms of life; and even the waiters at hotels showed the more alacrity in doing away with crumbs and creases and dregs with struggling flies in them. This potent charm, added to the fact that she was the eldest daughter, towards whom her mamma had always been in an apologetic state of mind for the evils brought on her by a step-father, may seem so full a reason for Gwendolen's domestic empire, that to look for any other would be to ask the reason of daylight when the sun is shining. But beware of arriving at conclusions without comparison. I remember having seen the same assiduous, apologetic attention awarded to persons who were not at all beautiful or unusual, whose firmness showed itself in no very graceful or euphonious way, and who were not eldest daughters with a tender, timid mother, compunctious at having subjected them to inconveniences. Some of them were a very common sort of men. And the only point of resemblance among them all was a strong determination to have what was pleasant, with a total fearlessness in making themselves disagreeable or dangerous when they did not get it. Who is so much cajoled and served with trembling by the weak females of a household as the unscrupulous male – capable, if he has not free way at home, of going and doing worse elsewhere? Hence I am forced to doubt whether even without her potent charm and peculiar filial position Gwendolen might not still have played the queen in exile, if only she had kept her inborn energy of egoistic desire, and her power of inspiring fear as to what she might say or do. However, she had the charm, and those who feared her were also fond of her; the fear and the fondness being perhaps both heightened by what may be called the iridescence of her character – the play of various, nay, contrary tendencies. For Macbeth's rhetoric about the impossibility of being many opposite things in the same moment, referred to the clumsy necessities of action and not to the subtler possibilities of feeling. We cannot speak a loyal word and be meanly silent, we cannot kill and not kill in the same moment; but a moment is room wide enough for the loyal and mean desire, for the outlash of a murderous thought and the sharp backward stroke of repentance.

Chapter Five

> Her wit
> Values itself so highly, that to her
> All matter else seems weak.
>
> – *Much Ado about Nothing*

Gwendolen's reception in the neighbourhood fulfilled her uncle's expectations. From Brackenshaw Castle to the Firs at Wanchester, where Mr Quallon the banker kept a generous house, she was welcomed with manifest admiration, and even those ladies who did not quite like her, felt a comfort in having a new, striking girl to invite; for hostesses who entertain much must make up their parties as ministers make up their cabinets, on grounds other than personal liking. Then, in order to have Gwendolen as a guest, it was not necessary to ask any one who was disagreeable, for Mrs Davilow always made a quiet, picturesque figure as a chaperon, and Mr Gascoigne was everywhere in request for his own sake.

Among the houses where Gwendolen was not quite liked, and yet invited, was Quetcham Hall. One of her first invitations was to a large dinner-party there, which made a sort of general introduction for her to the society of the neighbourhood; for in a select party of thirty and of well-composed proportions as to age, few visitable families could be entirely left out. No youthful figure there was comparable to Gwendolen's as she passed through the long suite of rooms adorned with light and flowers, and, visible at first as a slim figure floating along in white drapery, approached through one wide doorway after another into fuller illumination and definiteness. She had never had that sort of promenade before, and she felt exultingly that it befitted her: any one looking at her for the first time might have supposed that long galleries and lackeys had always been a matter of course in her life; while her cousin Anna, who was really more familiar with these things, felt almost as much embarrassed as a rabbit suddenly deposited in that well-lit space.

'Who is that with Gascoigne?' said the archdeacon, neglecting a discussion of military manœuvres on which, as a clergyman, he was naturally appealed to. And his son, on the other side of the room – a hopeful young scholar, who had already suggested some 'not less elegant than ingenious' emendations of Greek texts – said nearly at the same time, 'By George! who is that girl with the awfully well-set head and jolly figure?'

But to a mind of general benevolence, wishing everybody to look well, it was rather exasperating to see how Gwendolen eclipsed others: how even the handsome Miss Lawe, explained to be the daughter of Lady Lawe, looked suddenly broad, heavy, and inanimate; and how Miss Arrowpoint, unfortunately also dressed in white, immediately resembled a *carte-de-visite* in which one would fancy the skirt alone to have been charged for. Since Miss Arrowpoint was generally liked for the amiable unpretending way in which she wore her fortunes, and made a softening screen for the oddities of her mother, there seemed to be some unfitness in Gwendolen's looking so much more like a person of social importance.

'She is not really so handsome if you come to examine her features,' said Mrs Arrowpoint, later in the evening, confidentially to Mrs Vulcany. 'It is a certain style she has, which produces a great effect at first, but afterwards she is less agreeable.'

In fact, Gwendolen, not intending it, but intending the contrary, had offended her hostess, who, though not a splenetic or vindictive woman, had her susceptibilities. Several conditions had met in the Lady of Quetcham which to the reasoners in that neighbourhood seemed to have an essential connection with each other. It was occasionally recalled that she had been the heiress of a fortune gained by some moist or dry business in the city, in order fully to account for her having a squat figure, a harsh parrot-like voice, and a systematically high head-dress; and since these points made her externally rather ridiculous, it appeared to many only natural that she should have what are called literary tendencies. A little comparison would have shown that all these points are to be found apart; daughters of aldermen being often well-grown and well-featured, pretty women having sometimes harsh or husky voices, and the production of feeble literature being found compatible with the most diverse forms of *physique*, masculine as well as feminine.

Gwendolen, who had a keen sense of absurdity in others, but was kindly disposed towards any one who could make life agreeable to her, meant to win Mrs Arrowpoint by giving her an interest and attention beyond what others were probably inclined to show. But self-confidence is apt to address itself to an imaginary

dulness in others; as people who are well off speak in a cajoling tone to the poor, and those who are in the prime of life raise their voice and talk artificially to seniors, hastily conceiving them to be deaf and rather imbecile. Gwendolen, with all her cleverness and purpose to be agreeable, could not escape that form of stupidity: it followed in her mind, unreflectingly, that because Mrs Arrowpoint was ridiculous she was also likely to be wanting in penetration, and she went through her little scenes without suspicion that the various shades of her behaviour were all noted.

'You are fond of books as well as of music, riding, and archery, I hear,' Mrs Arrowpoint said, going to her for a *tête-à-tête* in the drawing-room after dinner: 'Catherine will be very glad to have so sympathetic a neighbour.' This little speech might have seemed the most graceful politeness, spoken in a low melodious tone; but with a twang fatally loud, it gave Gwendolen a sense of exercising patronage when she answered gracefully –

'It is I who am fortunate. Miss Arrowpoint will teach me what good music is: I shall be entirely a learner. I hear that she is a thorough musician.'

'Catherine has certainly had every advantage. We have a first-rate musician in the house now – Herr Klesmer; perhaps you know all his compositions. You must allow me to introduce him to you. You sing, I believe. Catherine plays three instruments, but she does not sing. I hope you will let us hear you. I understand you are an accomplished singer.'

'Oh no! – "die Kraft ist schwach, allein die Lust ist gross," as Mephistopheles says.'[2]

'Ah, you are a student of Goethe. Young ladies are so advanced now. I suppose you have read everything.'

'No, really. I shall be so glad if you will tell me what to read. I have been looking into all the books in the library at Offendene, but there is nothing readable. The leaves all stick together and smell musty. I wish I could write books to amuse myself, as you can! How delightful it must be to write books after one's own taste instead of reading other people's! Home-made books must be so nice.'

For an instant Mrs Arrowpoint's glance was a little sharper, but the perilous resemblance to satire in the last sentence took the hue of girlish simplicity when Gwendolen added –

'I would give anything to write a book!'

'And why should you not?' said Mrs Arrowpoint, encouragingly. 'You have but to begin as I did. Pen, ink, and paper are at everybody's command. But I will send you all I have written with pleasure.'

'Thanks. I shall be so glad to read your writings. Being acquainted with authors must give a peculiar understanding of their books: one would be able to tell then which parts were funny and which serious. I am sure I often laugh in the wrong place.' Here Gwendolen herself became aware of danger, and added quickly, 'In Shakespeare, you know, and other great writers that we can never see. But I always want to know more than there is in the books.'

'If you are interested in any of my subjects I can lend you many extra sheets in manuscript,' said Mrs Arrowpoint – while Gwendolen felt herself painfully in the position of the young lady who professed to like potted sprats. 'These are things I daresay I shall publish eventually: several friends have urged me to do so, and one doesn't like to be obstinate. My Tasso, for example – I could have made it twice the size.'

'I dote on Tasso,' said Gwendolen.

'Well, you shall have all my papers, if you like. So many, you know, have written about Tasso; but they are all wrong. As to the particular nature of his madness, and his feelings for Leonora, and the real cause of his imprisonment, and the character of Leonora, who, in my opinion, was a cold-hearted woman, else she would have married him in spite of her brother – they are all wrong. I differ from everybody.'

'How very interesting!' said Gwendolen. 'I like to differ from everybody; I think it is so stupid to agree. That is the worst of writing your opinions; you make people agree with you.'

This speech renewed a slight suspicion in Mrs Arrowpoint, and again her glance became for a moment examining. But Gwendolen looked very innocent, and continued with a docile air.

'I know nothing of Tasso except the *Gerusalemme Liberata*, which we read and learned by heart at school.'

'Ah, his life is more interesting than his poetry. I have constructed the early part of his life as a sort of romance. When one thinks of his father Bernardo, and so on, there is so much that must be true.'

'Imagination is often truer than fact,' said Gwendolen, decisively, though she could no more have explained these glib words than if they had been Coptic or Etruscan. 'I shall be so glad to learn all about Tasso – and his madness especially. I suppose poets are always a little mad.'

'To be sure – "the poet's eye in a fine frenzy rolling;" and somebody says of Marlowe –

> "For that fine madness still he did maintain,
> Which always should possess the poet's brain." '

'But it was not always found out, was it?' said Gwendolen, innocently. 'I suppose some of them rolled their eyes in private. Mad people are often very cunning.'

Again a shade flitted over Mrs Arrowpoint's face; but the entrance of the gentlemen prevented any immediate mischief between her and this too quick young lady, who had over-acted her *naïveté*.

'Ah, here comes Herr Klesmer,' said Mrs Arrowpoint, rising; and presently bringing him to Gwendolen, she left them to a dialogue which was agreeable on both sides, Herr Klesmer being a felicitous combination of the German, the Sclave, and the Semite, with grand features, brown hair floating in artistic fashion, and brown eyes in spectacles. His English had little foreignness except its fluency; and his alarming cleverness was made less formidable just then by a certain softening air of silliness which will sometimes befall even Genius in the desire of being agreeable to Beauty.

Music was soon begun. Miss Arrowpoint and Herr Klesmer played a four-handed piece on two pianos which convinced the company in general that it was long, and Gwendolen in particular that the neutral, placid-faced Miss Arrowpoint had a mastery of the instrument which put her own execution out of the question – though she was not discouraged as to her often-praised touch and style. After this every one became anxious to hear Gwendolen sing; especially Mr Arrowpoint; as was natural in a host and a perfect gentleman, of whom no one had anything to say but that he had married Miss Cuttler, and imported the best cigars; and he led her to the piano with easy politeness. Herr Klesmer closed the instrument in readiness for her, and smiled with pleasure at her approach; then placed himself at the distance of a few feet so that he could see her as she sang.

Gwendolen was not nervous: what she undertook to do she did without trembling, and singing was an enjoyment to her. Her voice was a moderately powerful soprano (some one had told her it was like Jenny Lind's), her ear good, and she was able to keep in tune, so that her singing gave pleasure to ordinary hearers, and she had been used to unmingled applause. She had the rare advantage of looking almost prettier when she was singing than at other times, and that Herr Klesmer was in front of her seemed not disagreeable. Her song, determined on beforehand, was a favourite aria of Bellini's, in which she felt quite sure of herself.

'Charming!' said Mr Arrowpoint, who had remained near, and the word was echoed around without more insincerity than we recognise in a brotherly way as human. But Herr Klesmer stood like a statue – if a statue can be imagined in spectacles; at least, he was as mute as a statue. Gwendolen was pressed to keep her seat and double the general pleasure, and she did not wish to refuse; but before resolving to do so, she moved a little towards Herr Klesmer, saying with a look of smiling appeal, 'It would be too cruel to a great musician. You cannot like to hear poor amateur singing.'

'No, truly; but that makes nothing,' said Herr Klesmer, suddenly speaking in an odious German fashion with staccato endings, quite unobservable in him before, and apparently depending on a change of mood, as Irishmen resume their strongest brogue when they are fervid or quarrelsome. 'That makes nothing. It is always acceptable to see you sing.'

Was there ever so unexpected an assertion of superiority? at least before the late Teutonic conquests? Gwendolen coloured deeply, but, with her usual presence of mind, did not show an ungraceful resentment by moving away immediately; and Miss Arrowpoint, who had been near enough to overhear (and also to observe that Herr Klesmer's mode of looking at Gwendolen was more conspicuously admiring than was quite consistent with good taste), now with the utmost tact and kindness came close to her and said –

'Imagine what I have to go through with this professor! He can hardly tolerate anything we English do in music. We can only put up with his severity, and make use of it to find out the worst that can be said of us. It is a little comfort to know that; and one can bear it when every one else is admiring.'

'I should be very much obliged to him for telling me the worst,' said Gwendolen, recovering herself. 'I daresay I have been extremely ill taught, in addition to having no talent – only liking for music.' This was very well expressed considering that it had never entered her mind before.

'Yes, it is true; you have not been well taught,' said Herr Klesmer, quietly. Woman was dear to him, but music was dearer. 'Still, you are not quite without gifts. You sing in tune, and you have a pretty fair organ. But you produce your notes badly; and that music which you sing is beneath you. It is a form of melody which expresses a puerile state of culture – a dandling, canting, see-saw kind of stuff – the passion and thought of people without any breadth of horizon. There is a sort of self-satisfied folly about every phrase of such melody; no cries of deep, mysterious passion – no conflict – no sense of the universal. It makes men small as they listen to it. Sing now something larger. And I shall see.'

'Oh, not now – by-and-by,' said Gwendolen, with a sinking of heart at the sudden width of horizon opened round her small musical performance. For a young lady desiring to lead, this first encounter in her campaign was startling. But she was bent on not behaving foolishly, and Miss Arrowpoint helped her by saying –

'Yes, by-and-by. I always require half an hour to get up my courage after being criticised by Herr Klesmer. We will ask him to play to us now: he is bound to show us what is good music.'

To be quite safe on this point Herr Klesmer played a composition of his own, a fantasia called *Freudvoll, Leidvoll, Gedankenvoll* – an extensive commentary on some melodic ideas not too grossly evident; and he certainly fetched as much variety and depth of passion out of the piano as that moderately responsive

instrument lends itself to, having an imperious magic in his fingers that seemed to send a nerve-thrill through ivory key and wooden hammer, and compel the strings to make a quivering lingering speech for him. Gwendolen, in spite of her wounded egoism, had fulness of nature enough to feel the power of this playing, and it gradually turned her inward sob of mortification into an excitement which lifted her for the moment into a desperate indifference about her own doings, or at least a determination to get a superiority over them by laughing at them as if they belonged to somebody else. Her eyes had become brighter, her cheeks slightly flushed, and her tongue ready for any mischievous remarks.

'I wish you would sing to us again, Miss Harleth,' said young Clintock, the archdeacon's classical son, who had been so fortunate as to take her to dinner, and came up to renew conversation as soon as Herr Klesmer's performance was ended. 'That is the style of music for me. I never can make anything of this tip-top playing. It is like a jar of leeches, where you can never tell either beginnings or endings. I could listen to your singing all day.'

'Yes, we should be glad of something popular now – another song from you would be a relaxation,' said Mrs Arrowpoint, who had also come near with polite intentions.

'That must be because you are in a puerile state of culture, and have no breadth of horizon. I have just learned that. I have been taught how bad my taste is, and am feeling growing pains. They are never pleasant,' said Gwendolen, not taking any notice of Mrs Arrowpoint, and looking up with a bright smile at young Clintock.

Mrs Arrowpoint was not insensible to this rudeness, but merely said, 'Well, we will not press anything disagreeably:' and as there was a perceptible outrush of imprisoned conversation just then, and a movement of guests seeking each other, she remained seated where she was, and looked round her with the relief of the hostess at finding she is not needed.

'I am glad you like this neighbourhood,' said young Clintock, well pleased with his station in front of Gwendolen.

'Exceedingly. There seems to be a little of everything and not much of anything.'

'That is rather equivocal praise.'

'Not with me. I like a little of everything; a little absurdity, for example, is very amusing. I am thankful for a few queer people; but much of them is a bore.'

(Mrs Arrowpoint, who was hearing this dialogue, perceived quite a new tone in Gwendolen's speech, and felt a revival of doubt as to her interest in Tasso's madness.)

'I think there should be more croquet, for one thing,' said young Clintock; 'I am usually away, but if I were more here I should go in for a croquet club. You are one of the archers, I think. But depend upon it croquet is the game of the future. It wants writing up, though. One of our best men has written a poem on it, in four cantos; – as good as Pope. I want him to publish it. You never read anything better.'

'I shall study croquet to-morrow. I shall take to it instead of singing.'

'No, no, not that; but do take to croquet. I will send you Jenning's poem, if you like. I have a manuscript copy.'

'Is he a great friend of yours?'

'Well, rather.'

'Oh, if he is only rather, I think I will decline. Or, if you send it me, will you promise not to catechise me upon it and ask me which part I like best? Because it is not so easy to know a poem without reading it as to know a sermon without listening.'

'Decidedly,' Mrs Arrowpoint thought, 'this girl is double and satirical. I shall be on my guard against her.'

But Gwendolen, nevertheless, continued to receive polite attentions from the family at Quetcham, not merely because invitations have larger grounds than those of personal liking, but because the trying little scene at the piano had awakened a kindly solicitude towards her in the gentle mind of Miss Arrowpoint, who managed all the invitations and visits, her mother being otherwise occupied.

Chapter Six

Croyez vous m’avoir humiliée pour m’avoir appris que la terre tourne autour du soleil? Je vous jure que je ne m’en estime pas moins.

– FONTENELLE: *Pluralité des Mondes*[3]

That lofty criticism had caused Gwendolen a new sort of pain. She would not have chosen to confess how unfortunate she thought herself in not having had Miss Arrowpoint’s musical advantages, so as to be able to question Herr Klesmer’s taste with the confidence of thorough knowledge; still less, to admit even to herself that Miss Arrowpoint each time they met raised an unwonted feeling of jealousy in her: not in the least because she was an heiress, but because it was really provoking that a girl whose appearance you could not characterise except by saying that her figure was slight and of middle stature, her features small, her eyes tolerable, and her complexion sallow, had nevertheless a certain mental superiority which could not be explained away – an exasperating thoroughness in her musical accomplishment, a fastidious discrimination in her general tastes, which made it impossible to force her admiration and kept you in awe of her standard. This insignificant-looking young lady of four-and-twenty, whom any one’s eyes would have passed over negligently if she had not been Miss Arrowpoint, might be suspected of a secret opinion that Miss Harleth’s acquirements were rather of a common order; and such an opinion was not made agreeable to think of by being always veiled under a perfect kindness of manner.

But Gwendolen did not like to dwell on facts which threw an unfavourable light on herself. The musical Magus who had so suddenly widened her horizon was not always on the scene; and his being constantly backwards and forwards between London and Quetcham soon began to be thought of as offering opportunities for converting him to a more admiring state of mind. Meanwhile, in the manifest pleasure her singing gave at Brackenshaw Castle, the Firs, and elsewhere, she recovered her equanimity, being disposed to think approval more trustworthy than objection, and not being one of the exceptional persons who have a parching thirst for a perfection undemanded by their neighbours. Perhaps it would have been rash to say then that she was at all exceptional inwardly, or that the unusual in her was more than her rare grace of movement and bearing, and a certain daring which gave piquancy to a very common egoistic ambition, such as exists under many clumsy exteriors and is taken no notice of. For I suppose that the set of the head does not really determine the hunger of the inner self for supremacy: it only makes a difference sometimes as to the way in which the supremacy is held attainable, and a little also to the degree in which it can be attained; especially when the hungry one is a girl, whose passion for doing what is remarkable has an ideal limit in consistency with the highest breeding and perfect freedom from the sordid need of income. Gwendolen was as inwardly rebellious against the restraints of family conditions, and as ready to look through obligations into her own fundamental want of feeling for them, as if she had been sustained by the boldest speculations; but she really had no such speculations, and would at once have marked herself off from any sort of theoretical or practically reforming women by satirising them. She rejoiced to feel herself exceptional; but her horizon was that of the genteel romance where the heroine’s soul poured out in her journal is full of vague power, originality, and general rebellion, while her life moves strictly in the sphere of fashion; and if she wanders into a swamp, the pathos lies partly, so to speak, in her having on her satin shoes. Here is a restraint which nature and society have provided on the pursuit of striking adventure; so that a soul burning with a sense of what the universe is not, and ready to take all existence as fuel, is nevertheless held captive by the ordinary wire-work of social forms and does nothing particular.

This commonplace result was what Gwendolen found herself threatened with even in the novelty of the first winter at Offendene. What she was clear upon was, that she did not wish to lead the same sort of life as ordinary young ladies did; but what she was not clear upon was, how she should set about leading any other, and what were the particular acts which she would assert her freedom by doing. Offendene remained a good background, if anything would happen there; but on the whole the neighbourhood was in fault.

Beyond the effect of her beauty on a first presentation, there was not much excitement to be got out of her earliest invitations, and she came home after little sallies of satire and knowingness, such as had offended Mrs Arrowpoint, to fill the intervening days with the most girlish devices. The strongest assertion she was able to make of her individual claims was to leave out Alice’s lessons (on the principle that Alice was more likely to

excel in ignorance), and to employ her with Miss Merry, and the maid who was understood to wait on all the ladies, in helping to arrange various dramatic costumes which Gwendolen pleased herself with having in readiness for some future occasions of acting in charades or theatrical pieces, occasions which she meant to bring about by force of will or contrivance. She had never acted – only made a figure in *tableaux vivans* at school; but she felt assured that she could act well, and having been once or twice to the Théâtre Français, and also heard her mamma speak of Rachel, her waking dreams and cogitations as to how she would manage her destiny sometimes turned on the question whether she would become an actress like Rachel, since she was more beautiful than that thin Jewess. Meanwhile the wet days before Christmas were passed pleasantly in the preparation of costumes, Greek, Oriental, and Composite, in which Gwendolen attitudinised and speechified before a domestic audience, including even the housekeeper, who was once pressed into it that she might swell the notes of applause; but having shown herself unworthy by observing that Miss Harleth looked far more like a queen in her own dress than in that baggy thing with her arms all bare, she was not invited a second time.

'Do I look as well as Rachel, mamma?' said Gwendolen, one day when she had been showing herself in her Greek dress to Anna, and going through scraps of scenes with much tragic intention.

'You have better arms than Rachel,' said Mrs Davilow; 'your arms would do for anything, Gwen. But your voice is not so tragic as hers; it is not so deep.'

'I can make it deeper, if I like,' said Gwendolen, provisionally; then she added, with decision, 'I think a higher voice is more tragic: it is more feminine; and the more feminine a woman is, the more tragic it seems when she does desperate actions.'

'There may be something in that,' said Mrs Davilow, languidly. 'But I don't know what good there is in making one's blood creep. And if there is anything horrible to be done, I should like it to be left to the men.'

'Oh mamma, you are so dreadfully prosaic! As if all the great poetic criminals were not women! I think the men are poor cautious creatures.'

'Well, dear, and you – who are afraid to be alone in the night – I don't think you would be very bold in crime, thank God.'

'I am not talking about reality, mamma,' said Gwendolen, impatiently. Then, her mamma being called out of the room, she turned quickly to her cousin, as if taking an opportunity, and said, 'Anna, do ask my uncle to let us get up some charades at the Rectory. Mr Middleton and Warham could act with us – just for practice. Mamma says it will not do to have Mr Middleton consulting and rehearsing here. He is a stick, but we could give him suitable parts. Do ask; or else I will.'

'Oh, not till Rex comes. He is so clever, and such a dear old thing, and he will act Napoleon looking over the sea. He looks just like Napoleon. Rex can do anything.'

'I don't in the least believe in your Rex, Anna,' said Gwendolen, laughing at her. 'He will turn out to be like those wretched blue and yellow water-colours of his which you hang up in your bedroom and worship.'

'Very well, you will see,' said Anna. 'It is not that I know what is clever, but he has got a scholarship already, and papa says he will get a fellowship, and nobody is better at games. He is cleverer than Mr Middleton, and everybody but you calls Mr Middleton clever.'

'So he may be in a dark-lantern sort of way. But he *is* a stick. If he had to say, "Perdition catch my soul, but I do love her," he would say it in just the same tone as, "Here endeth the second lesson." '

'Oh Gwendolen!' said Anna, shocked at these promiscuous allusions. 'And it is very unkind of you to speak so of him, for he admires you very much. I heard Warham say one day to mamma, "Middleton is regularly spoony upon Gwendolen." She was very angry with him; but I know what it means. It is what they say at college for being in love.'

'How can I help it?' said Gwendolen, rather contemptuously. 'Perdition catch my soul if I love *him*.'

'No, of course; papa, I think, would not wish it. And he is to go away soon. But it makes me sorry when you ridicule him.'

'What shall you do to me when I ridicule Rex?' said Gwendolen, wickedly.

'Now, Gwendolen, dear, you *will not*?' said Anna, her eyes filling with tears. 'I could not bear it. But there really is nothing in him to ridicule. Only you may find out things. For no one ever thought of laughing at Mr Middleton before you. Every one said he was nice-looking, and his manners perfect. I am sure I have always been frightened at him because of his learning and his square-cut coat, and his being a nephew of the bishop's and all that. But you will not ridicule Rex – promise me.' Anna ended with a beseeching look which touched Gwendolen.

'You are a dear little coz,' she said, just touching the tip of Anna's chin with her thumb and forefinger. 'I don't ever want to do anything that will vex you. Especially if Rex is to make everything come off – charades and everything.'

And when at last Rex was there, the animation he brought into the life at Offendene and the Rectory, and

his ready partnership in Gwendolen's plans, left her no inclination for any ridicule that was not of an open and flattering kind, such as he himself enjoyed. He was a fine open-hearted youth, with a handsome face strongly resembling his father's and Anna's, but softer in expression than the one, and larger in scale than the other: a bright, healthy, loving nature, enjoying ordinary, innocent things so much that vice had no temptation for him, and what he knew of it lay too entirely in the outer courts and little-visited chambers of his mind for him to think of it with great repulsion. Vicious habits were with him 'what some fellows did' – 'stupid stuff' which he liked to keep aloof from. He returned Anna's affection as fully as could be expected of a brother whose pleasures apart from her were more than the sum total of hers; and he had never known a stronger love.

The cousins were continually together at the one house or the other – chiefly at Offendene, where there was more freedom, or rather where there was a more complete sway for Gwendolen; and whatever she wished became a ruling purpose for Rex. The charades came off according to her plans; and also some other little scenes not contemplated by her in which her acting was more impromptu. It was at Offendene that the charades and *tableaux* were rehearsed and presented, Mrs Davilow seeing no objection even to Mr Middleton's being invited to share in them, now that Rex too was there – especially as his services were indispensable; Warham, who was studying for India with a Wanchester 'coach,' having no time to spare, and being generally dismal under a cram of everything except the answers needed at the forthcoming Examination, which might disclose the welfare of our Indian Empire to be somehow connected with a quotable knowledge of Browne's Pastorals.

Mr Middleton was persuaded to play various grave parts, Gwendolen having flattered him on his enviable immobility of countenance; and at first a little pained and jealous at her comradeship with Rex, he presently drew encouragement from the thought that this sort of cousinly familiarity excluded any serious passion. Indeed, he occasionally felt that her more formal treatment of himself was such a sign of favour as to warrant his making advances before he left Pennicote, though he had intended to keep his feelings in reserve until his position should be more assured. Miss Gwendolen, quite aware that she was adored by this unexceptionable young clergyman with pale whiskers and square-cut collar, felt nothing more on the subject than that she had no objection to be adored: she turned her eyes on him with calm mercilessness and caused him many mildly agitating hopes by seeming always to avoid dramatic contact with him – for all meanings, we know, depend on the key of interpretation.

Some persons might have thought beforehand that a young man of Anglican leanings, having a sense of sacredness much exercised on small things as well as great, rarely laughing save from politeness, and in general regarding the mention of spades by their naked names as rather coarse, would not have seen a fitting bride for himself in a girl who was daring in ridicule, and showed none of the special grace required in the clergyman's wife; or, that a young man informed by theological reading would have reflected that he was not likely to meet the taste of a lively, restless young lady like Miss Harleth. But are we always obliged to explain why the facts are not what some persons thought beforehand? The apology lies on their side, who had that erroneous way of thinking.

As for Rex, who would possibly have been sorry for poor Middleton if he had been aware of the excellent curate's inward conflict, he was too completely absorbed in a first passion to have observation for any person or thing. He did not observe Gwendolen; he only felt what she said or did, and the back of his head seemed to be a good organ of information as to whether she was in the room or out. Before the end of the first fortnight he was so deeply in love that it was impossible for him to think of his life except as bound up with Gwendolen's. He could see no obstacles, poor boy; his own love seemed a guarantee of hers, since it was one with the unperturbed delight in her image, so that he could no more dream of her giving him pain than an Egyptian could dream of snow. She sang and played to him whenever he liked, was always glad of his companionship in riding, though his borrowed steeds were often comic, was ready to join in any fun of his, and showed a right appreciation of Anna. No mark of sympathy seemed absent. That because Gwendolen was the most perfect creature in the world she was to make a grand match, had not occurred to him. He had no conceit – at least, not more than goes to make up the necessary gum and consistence of a substantial personality: it was only that in the young bliss of loving he took Gwendolen's perfection as part of that good which had seemed one with life to him, being the outcome of a happy, well-embodied nature.

One incident which happened in the course of their dramatic attempts impressed Rex as a sign of her unusual sensibility. It showed an aspect of her nature which could not have been preconceived by any one who, like him, had only seen her habitual fearlessness in active exercises and her high spirits in society.

After a good deal of rehearsing it was resolved that a select party should be invited to Offendene to witness the performances which went with so much satisfaction to the actors. Anna had caused a pleasant surprise; nothing could be neater than the way in which she played her little parts; one would even have suspected her of hiding much sly observation under her simplicity. And Mr Middleton answered very well by not trying to

be comic. The main source of doubt and retardation had been Gwendolen's desire to appear in her Greek dress. No word for a charade would occur to her either waking or dreaming that suited her purpose of getting a statuesque pose in this favourite costume. To choose a motive from Racine was of no use, since Rex and the others could not declaim French verse, and improvised speeches would turn the scene into burlesque. Besides, Mr Gascoigne prohibited the acting of scenes from plays: he usually protested against the notion that an amusement which was fitting for every one else was unfitting for a clergyman; but he would not in this matter overstep the line of decorum as drawn in that part of Wessex, which did not exclude his sanction of the young people's acting charades in his sister-in-law's house – a very different affair from private theatricals in the full sense of the word.

Everybody of course was concerned to satisfy this wish of Gwendolen's, and Rex proposed that they should wind up with a tableau in which the effect of her majesty would not be marred by any one's speech. This pleased her thoroughly, and the only question was the choice of the tableau.

'Something pleasant, children, I beseech you,' said Mrs Davilow; 'I can't have any Greek wickedness.'

'It is no worse than Christian wickedness, mamma,' said Gwendolen, whose mention of Rachelesque heroines had called forth that remark.

'And less scandalous,' said Rex. 'Besides, one thinks of it as all gone by and done with. What do you say to Briseis being led away? I would be Achilles, and you would be looking round at me – after the print we have at the Rectory.'

'That would be a good attitude for me,' said Gwendolen, in a tone of acceptance. But afterwards she said with decision, 'No. It will not do. There must be three men in proper costume, else it will be ridiculous.'

'I have it!' said Rex, after a little reflection. 'Hermione as the statue in the Winter's Tale! I will be Leontes, and Miss Merry Paulina, one on each side. Our dress won't signify,' he went on laughingly; 'it will be more Shakespearian and romantic if Leontes looks like Napoleon, and Paulina like a modern spinster.'

And Hermione was chosen; all agreeing that age was of no consequence; but Gwendolen urged that instead of the mere tableau there should be just enough acting of the scene to introduce the striking up of the music as a signal for her to step down and advance; when Leontes, instead of embracing her, was to kneel and kiss the hem of her garment, and so the curtain was to fall. The antechamber with folding doors lent itself admirably to the purposes of a stage, and the whole of the establishment, with the addition of Jarrett the village carpenter, was absorbed in the preparations for an entertainment which, considering that it was an imitation of acting, was likely to be successful, since we know from ancient fable that an imitation may have more chance of success than the original.

Gwendolen was not without a special exultation in the prospect of this occasion, for she knew that Herr Klesmer was again at Quetcham, and she had taken care to include him among the invited.

Klesmer came. He was in one of his placid silent moods, and sat in serene contemplation, replying to all appeals in benignant-sounding syllables more or less articulate – as taking up his cross meekly in a world overgrown with amateurs, or as careful how he moved his lion paws lest he should crush a rampant and vociferous mouse.

Everything indeed went off smoothly and according to expectation – all that was improvised and accidental being of a probable sort – until the incident occurred which showed Gwendolen in an unforeseen phase of emotion. How it came about was at first a mystery.

The tableau of Hermione was doubly striking from its dissimilarity with what had gone before: it was answering perfectly, and a murmur of applause had been gradually suppressed while Leontes gave his permission that Paulina should exercise her utmost art and make the statue move.

Hermione, her arm resting on a pillar, was elevated by about six inches, which she counted on as a means of showing her pretty foot and instep, when at the given signal she should advance and descend.

'Music, awake her, strike!' said Paulina (Mrs Davilow, who by special entreaty had consented to take the part in a white burnous and hood).

Herr Klesmer, who had been good-natured enough to seat himself at the piano, struck a thunderous chord – but in the same instant, and before Hermione had put forth her foot, the movable panel, which was on a line with the piano, flew open on the right opposite the stage and disclosed the picture of the dead face and the fleeing figure, brought out in pale definiteness by the position of the wax-lights. Every one was startled, but all eyes in the act of turning towards the opened panel were recalled by a piercing cry from Gwendolen, who stood without change of attitude, but with a change of expression that was terrifying in its terror. She looked like a statue into which a soul of Fear had entered: her pallid lips were parted; her eyes, usually narrowed under their long lashes, were dilated and fixed. Her mother, less surprised than alarmed, rushed towards her, and Rex too could not help going to her side. But the touch of her mother's arm had the effect of an electric charge; Gwendolen fell on her knees and put her hands before her face. She was still trembling, but mute, and it seemed that she had self-consciousness enough to aim at controlling her signs of terror, for she presently

allowed herself to be raised from her kneeling posture and led away, while the company were relieving their minds by explanation.

'A magnificent bit of *plastik* that!' said Klesmer to Miss Arrow-point. And a quick fire of undertoned question and answer went round.

'Was it part of the play?'

'Oh no, surely not. Miss Harleth was too much affected. A sensitive creature!'

'Dear me! I was not aware that there was a painting behind that panel; were you?'

'No; how should I? Some eccentricity in one of the Earl's family long ago, I suppose.'

'How very painful! Pray shut it up.'

'Was the door locked? It is very mysterious. It must be the spirits.'

'But there is no medium present.'

'How do you know that? We must conclude that there is, when such things happen.'

'Oh, the door was not locked; it was probably the sudden vibration from the piano that sent it open.'

This conclusion came from Mr Gascoigne, who begged Miss Merry if possible to get the key. But this readiness to explain the mystery was thought by Mrs Vulcany unbecoming in a clergyman, and she observed in an undertone that Mr Gascoigne was always a little too worldly for her taste. However, the key was produced, and the rector turned it in the lock with an emphasis rather offensively rationalising – as who should say, 'It will not start open again' – putting the key in his pocket as a security.

However, Gwendolen soon reappeared, showing her usual spirits, and evidently determined to ignore as far as she could the striking change she had made in the part of Hermione.

But when Klesmer said to her, 'We have to thank you for devising a perfect climax: you could not have chosen a finer bit of *plastik*,' there was a flush of pleasure in her face. She liked to accept as a belief what was really no more than delicate feigning. He divined that the betrayal into a passion of fear had been mortifying to her, and wished her to understand that he took it for good acting. Gwendolen cherished the idea that now he was struck with her talent as well as her beauty, and her uneasiness about his opinion was half turned to complacency.

But too many were in the secret of what had been included in the rehearsals, and what had not, and no one besides Klesmer took the trouble to soothe Gwendolen's imagined mortification. The general sentiment was that the incident should be let drop.

There had really been a medium concerned in the starting open of the panel: one who had quitted the room in haste and crept to bed in much alarm of conscience. It was the small Isabel, whose intense curiosity, unsatisfied by the brief glimpse she had had of the strange picture on the day of arrival at Offendene, had kept her on the watch for an opportunity of finding out where Gwendolen had put the key, of stealing it from the discovered drawer when the rest of the family were out, and getting on a stool to unlock the panel. While she was indulging her thirst for knowledge in this way, a noise which she feared was an approaching footstep alarmed her: she closed the door and attempted hurriedly to lock it, but failing and not daring to linger, she withdrew the key and trusted that the panel would stick, as it seemed well inclined to do. In this confidence she had returned the key to its former place, stilling any anxiety by the thought that if the door were discovered to be unlocked nobody could know how the unlocking came about. The inconvenient Isabel, like other offenders, did not foresee her own impulse to confession, a fatality which came upon her the morning after the party, when Gwendolen said at the breakfast-table, 'I know the door was locked before the housekeeper gave me the key, for I tried it myself afterwards. Some one must have been to my drawer and taken the key.'

It seemed to Isabel that Gwendolen's awful eyes had rested on her more than on the other sisters, and without any time for resolve she said with a trembling lip, 'Please forgive me, Gwendolen.'

The forgiveness was sooner bestowed than it would have been if Gwendolen had not desired to dismiss from her own and every one else's memory any case in which she had shown her susceptibility to terror. She wondered at herself in these occasional experiences, which seemed like a brief remembered madness, an unexplained exception from her normal life; and in this instance she felt a peculiar vexation that her helpless fear had shown itself, not, as usual, in solitude, but in well-lit company. Her ideal was to be daring in speech and reckless in braving dangers, both moral and physical; and though her practice fell far behind her ideal, this shortcoming seemed to be due to the pettiness of circumstances, the narrow theatre which life offers to a girl of twenty, who cannot conceive herself as anything else than a lady, or as in any position which could lack the tribute of respect. She had no permanent consciousness of other fetters, or of more spiritual restraints, having always disliked whatever was presented to her under the name of religion, in the same way that some people dislike arithmetic and accounts: it had raised no other emotion in her, no alarm, no longing; so that the question whether she believed it had not occurred to her, any more than it had occurred to her to inquire into the conditions of colonial property and banking, on which, as she had had many opportunities of knowing, the

family fortune was dependent. All these facts about herself she would have been ready to admit, and even, more or less indirectly, to state. What she unwillingly recognised, and would have been glad for others to be unaware of, was that liability of hers to fits of spiritual dread, though this fountain of awe within her had not found its way into connection with the religion taught her or with any human relations. She was ashamed and frightened, as at what might happen again, in remembering her tremor on suddenly feeling herself alone, when, for example, she was walking without companionship and there came some rapid change in the light. Solitude in any wide scene impressed her with an undefined feeling of immeasurable existence aloof from her, in the midst of which she was helplessly incapable of asserting herself. The little astronomy taught her at school used sometimes to set her imagination at work in a way that made her tremble: but always when some one joined her she recovered her indifference to the vastness in which she seemed an exile; she found again her usual world in which her will was of some avail, and the religious nomenclature belonging to this world was no more identified for her with those uneasy impressions of awe than her uncle's surplices seen out of use at the Rectory. With human ears and eyes about her, she had always hitherto recovered her confidence, and felt the possibility of winning empire.

To her mamma and others her fits of timidity or terror were sufficiently accounted for by her 'sensitiveness' or the 'excitability of her nature;' but these explanatory phrases required conciliation with much that seemed to be blank indifference or rare self-mastery. Heat is a great agent and a useful word, but considered as a means of explaining the universe it requires an extensive knowledge of differences; and as a means of explaining character 'sensitiveness' is in much the same predicament. But who, loving a creature like Gwendolen, would not be inclined to regard every peculiarity in her as a mark of pre-eminence? That was what Rex did. After the Hermione scene he was more persuaded than ever that she must be instinct with all feeling, and not only readier to respond to a worshipful love, but able to love better than other girls. Rex felt the summer on his young wings and soared happily.

Chapter Seven

Perigot. As the bonny lasse passed bye,.
Willie. Hey, ho, bonnilasse!
P. She roode at me with glauncing eye,
W. As clear as the crystall glasse.
P. All as the sunny beame so bright,
W. Hey, ho, the sunnebeame!
P. Glaunceth from Phoebus' face forthright,
W. So love into thy heart did streame.

– SPENSER: *Shepheard's Calendar*

The kindliest symptom, yet the most alarming crisis in the ticklish state of youth; the nourisher and destroyer of hopeful wits; … the servitude above freedom; the gentle mind's religion; the liberal superstition.
– CHARLES LAMB

The first sign of the unimagined snow-storm was like the transparent white cloud that seems to set off the blue. Anna was in the secret of Rex's feeling; though for the first time in their lives he had said nothing to her about what he most thought of, and he only took it for granted that she knew it. For the first time, too, Anna could not say to Rex what was continually in her mind. Perhaps it might have been a pain which she would have had to conceal, that he should so soon care for some one else more than for herself, if such a feeling had not been thoroughly neutralised by doubt and anxiety on his behalf. Anna admired her cousin – would have said with simple sincerity, 'Gwendolen is always very good to me,' and held it in the order of things for herself to be entirely subject to this cousin; but she looked at her with mingled fear and distrust, with a puzzled contemplation as of some wondrous and beautiful animal whose nature was a mystery, and who, for anything Anna knew, might have an appetite for devouring all the small creatures that were her own particular pets. And now Anna's heart was sinking under the heavy conviction which she dared not utter, that Gwendolen would never care for Rex. What she herself held in tenderness and reverence had constantly seemed indifferent to Gwendolen, and it was easier to imagine her scorning Rex than returning any tenderness of his. Besides, she was always thinking of being something extraordinary. And poor Rex! Papa would be angry with him, if he knew. And of course he was too young to be in love in that way; and she, Anna, had thought that it would be years and years before anything of that sort came, and that she would be Rex's housekeeper ever so long. But what a heart must that be which did not return his love! Anna, in the prospect of his suffering, was beginning to dislike her too fascinating cousin.

It seemed to her, as it did to Rex, that the weeks had been filled with a tumultuous life evident to all observers: if he had been questioned on the subject he would have said that he had no wish to conceal what he hoped would be an engagement which he should immediately tell his father of; and yet for the first time in his life he was reserved not only about his feelings but – which was more remarkable to Anna – about certain actions. She, on her side, was nervous each time her father or mother began to speak to her in private lest they should say anything about Rex and Gwendolen. But the elders were not in the least alive to this agitating drama, which went forward chiefly in a sort of pantomime extremely lucid in the minds thus expressing themselves, but easily missed by spectators who were running their eyes over the Guardian or the Clerical Gazette, and regarded the trivialities of the young ones with scarcely more interpretation than they gave to the actions of lively ants.

'Where are you going, Rex?' said Anna one grey morning when her father had set off in the carriage to the sessions, Mrs Gascoigne with him, and she had observed that her brother had on his antigropelos, the utmost approach he possessed to a hunting equipment.

'Going to see the hounds throw off at the Three Barns.'

'Are you going to take Gwendolen?' said Anna, timidly.

'She told you, did she?'

'No, but I thought—Does papa know you are going?'

‘Not that I am aware of. I don’t suppose he would trouble himself about the matter.’

‘You are going to use his horse?’

‘He knows I do that whenever I can.’

‘Don’t let Gwendolen ride after the hounds, Rex,’ said Anna, whose fears gifted her with second-sight.

‘Why not?’ said Rex, smiling rather provokingly.

‘Papa and mamma and aunt Davilow all wish her not to. They think it is not right for her.’

‘Why should you suppose she is going to do what is not right?’

‘Gwendolen minds nobody sometimes,’ said Anna, getting bolder by dint of a little anger.

‘Then she would not mind me,’ said Rex, perversely making a joke of poor Anna’s anxiety.

‘Oh Rex, I cannot bear it. You will make yourself very unhappy.’ Here Anna burst into tears.

‘Nannie, Nannie, what on earth is the matter with you?’ said Rex, a little impatient at being kept in this way, hat on and whip in hand.

‘She will not care for you one bit – I know she never will!’ said the poor child in a sobbing whisper. She had lost all control of herself.

Rex reddened and hurried away from her out of the hall door, leaving her to the miserable consciousness of having made herself disagreeable in vain.

He did think of her words as he rode along: they had the unwelcomeness which all unfavourable fortune-telling has, even when laughed at; but he quickly explained them as springing from little Anna’s tenderness, and began to be sorry that he was obliged to come away without soothing her. Every other feeling on the subject, however, was quickly merged in a resistant belief to the contrary of hers, accompanied with a new determination to prove that he was right. This sort of certainty had just enough kinship to doubt and uneasiness to hurry on a confession which an untouched security might have delayed.

Gwendolen was already mounted and riding up and down the avenue when Rex appeared at the gate. She had provided herself against disappointment in case he did not appear in time by having the groom ready behind her, for she would not have waited beyond a reasonable time. But now the groom was dismissed, and the two rode away in delightful freedom. Gwendolen was in her highest spirits, and Rex thought that she had never looked so lovely before: her figure, her long white throat, and the curves of her cheek and chin were always set off to perfection by the compact simplicity of her riding dress. He could not conceive a more perfect girl; and to a youthful lover like Rex it seems that the fundamental identity of the good, the true, and the beautiful, is already extant and manifest in the object of his love. Most observers would have held it more than equally accountable that a girl should have like impressions about Rex, for in his handsome face there was nothing corresponding to the undefinable stinging quality – as it were a trace of demon ancestry – which made some beholders hesitate in their admiration of Gwendolen.

It was an exquisite January morning in which there was no threat of rain, but a grey sky making the calmest background for the charms of a mild winter scene: – the grassy borders of the lanes, the hedgerows sprinkled with red berries and haunted with low twitterings, the purple bareness of the elms, the rich brown of the furrows. The horses’ hoofs made a musical chime, accompanying their young voices. She was laughing at his equipment, for he was the reverse of a dandy, and he was enjoying her laughter: the freshness of the morning mingled with the freshness of their youth; and every sound that came from their clear throats, every glance they gave each other, was the bubbling outflow from a spring of joy. It was all morning to them, within and without. And thinking of them in these moments one is tempted to that futile sort of wishing – if only things could have been a little otherwise then, so as to have been greatly otherwise after! – if only these two beautiful young creatures could have pledged themselves to each other then and there, and never through life have swerved from that pledge! For some of the goodness which Rex believed in was there. Goodness is a large, often a prospective word; like harvest, which at one stage when we talk of it lies all underground, with an indeterminate future: is the germ prospering in the darkness? at another, it has put forth delicate green blades, and by-and-by the trembling blossoms are ready to be dashed off by an hour of rough wind or rain. Each stage has its peculiar blight, and may have the healthy life choked out of it by a particular action of the foul land which rears or neighbours it, or by damage brought from foulness afar.

‘Anna had got it into her head that you would want to ride after the hounds this morning,’ said Rex, whose secret associations with Anna’s words made this speech seem quite perilously near the most momentous of subjects.

‘Did she?’ said Gwendolen, laughingly. ‘What a little clairvoyante she is!’

‘Shall you?’ said Rex, who had not believed in her intending to do it if the elders objected, but confided in her having good reasons.

‘I don’t know. I can’t tell what I shall do till I get there. Clairvoyantes are often wrong: they foresee what is likely. I am not fond of what is likely; it is always dull. I do what is unlikely.’

‘Ah, there you tell me a secret. When once I knew what people in general would be likely to do, I should

know you would do the opposite. So you would have come round to a likelihood of your own sort. I shall be able to calculate on you. You couldn't surprise me.'

'Yes, I could. I should turn round and do what was likely for people in general,' said Gwendolen, with a musical laugh.

'You see you can't escape some sort of likelihood. And contradictoriness makes the strongest likelihood of all. You must give up a plan.'

'No, I shall not. My plan is to do what pleases me.' (Here should any young lady incline to imitate Gwendolen, let her consider the set of her head and neck: if the angle there had been different, the chin protrusive and the cervical vertebrae a trifle more curved in their position, ten to one Gwendolen's words would have had a jar in them for the sweet-natured Rex. But everything odd in her speech was humour and pretty banter, which he was only anxious to turn towards one point.)

'Can you manage to feel only what pleases you?' said he.

'Of course not; that comes from what other people do. But if the world were pleasanter, one would only feel what was pleasant. Girls' lives are so stupid: they never do what they like.'

'I thought that was more the case of the men. They are forced to do hard things, and are often dreadfully bored, and knocked to pieces too. And then, if we love a girl very dearly we want to do as she likes, so after all you have your own way.'

'I don't believe it. I never saw a married woman who had her own way.'

'What should you like to do?' said Rex, quite guilelessly, and in real anxiety.

'Oh, I don't know! – go to the North Pole, or ride steeplechases, or go to be a queen in the East like Lady Hester Stanhope,' said Gwendolen, flightily. Her words were born on her lips, but she would have been at a loss to give an answer of deeper origin.

'You don't mean you would never be married?'

'No; I didn't say that. Only when I married, I should not do as other women do.'

'You might do just as you liked if you married a man who loved you more dearly than anything else in the world,' said Rex, who, poor youth, was moving in themes outside the curriculum in which he had promised to win distinction. 'I know one who does.'

'Don't talk of Mr Middleton, for heaven's sake,' said Gwendolen, hastily, a quick blush spreading over her face and neck, 'that is Anna's chant. I hear the hounds. Let us go on.'

She put her chestnut to a canter, and Rex had no choice but to follow her. Still he felt encouraged. Gwendolen was perfectly aware that her cousin was in love with her; but she had no idea that the matter was of any consequence, having never had the slightest visitation of painful love herself. She wished the small romance of Rex's devotion to fill up the time of his stay at Pennicote, and to avoid explanations which would bring it to an untimely end. Besides, she objected, with a sort of physical repulsion, to being directly made love to. With all her imaginative delight in being adored, there was a certain fierceness of maidenhood in her.

But all other thoughts were soon lost for her in the excitement of the scene at the Three Barns. Several gentlemen of the hunt knew her, and she exchanged pleasant greetings. Rex could not get another word with her. The colour, the stir of the field had taken possession of Gwendolen with a strength which was not due to habitual association, for she had never yet ridden after the hounds – only said she should like to do it, and so drawn forth a prohibition; her mamma dreading the danger, and her uncle declaring that for his part he held that kind of violent exercise unseemly in a woman, and that whatever might be done in other parts of the country, no lady of good position followed the Wessex hunt: no one but Mrs Gadsby, the yeomanry captain's wife, who had been a kitchenmaid and still spoke like one. This last argument had some effect on Gwendolen, and had kept her halting between her desire to assert her freedom and her horror of being classed with Mrs Gadsby.

Some of the most unexceptionable women in the neighbourhood occasionally went to see the hounds throw off, but it happened that none of them were present this morning to abstain from following, while Mrs Gadsby, with her doubtful antecedents grammatical and otherwise, was not visible to make following seem unbecoming. Thus Gwendolen felt no check on the animal stimulus that came from the stir and tongue of the hounds, the pawing of the horses, the varying voices of men, the movement hither and thither of vivid colour on the background of green and grey stillness: – that utmost excitement of the coming chase which consists in feeling something like a combination of dog and horse, with the superadded thrill of social vanities and consciousness of centaur-power which belong to humankind.

Rex would have felt more of the same enjoyment if he could have kept nearer to Gwendolen, and not seen her constantly occupied with acquaintances, or looked at by would-be acquaintances, all on lively horses which veered about and swept the surrounding space as effectually as a revolving lever.

'Glad to see you here this fine morning, Miss Harleth,' said Lord Brackenshaw, a middle-aged peer of aristocratic seediness in stained pink, with easy-going manners which would have made the threatened Deluge

seem of no consequence. ‘We shall have a first-rate run. A pity you don’t go with us. Have you ever tried your little chestnut at a ditch? you wouldn’t be afraid, eh?’

‘Not the least in the world,’ said Gwendolen. And this was true; she was never fearful in action and companionship. ‘I have often taken him at some rails and a ditch too, near—’

‘Ah, by Jove!’ said his lordship, quietly, in notation that something was happening which must break off the dialogue: and as he reined off his horse, Rex was bringing his sober hackney up to Gwendolen’s side when—the hounds gave tongue, and the whole field was in motion as if the whirl of the earth were carrying it; Gwendolen along with everything else; no word of notice to Rex, who without a second thought followed too. Could he let Gwendolen go alone? under other circumstances he would have enjoyed the run, but he was just now perturbed by the check which had been put on the impetus to utter his love, and get utterance in return, an impetus which could not at once resolve itself into a totally different sort of chase, at least with the consciousness of being on his father’s grey nag, a good horse enough in his way, but of sober years and ecclesiastical habits. Gwendolen on her spirited little chestnut was up with the best, and felt as secure as an immortal goddess, having, if she had thought of risk, a core of confidence that no ill luck would happen to her. But she thought of no such thing, and certainly not of any risk there might be for her cousin. If she had thought of him, it would have struck her as a droll picture that he should be gradually falling behind, and looking round in search of gates: a fine lithe youth, whose heart must be panting with all the spirit of a beagle, stuck as if under a wizard’s spell on a stiff clerical hackney, would have made her laugh with a sense of fun much too strong for her to reflect on his mortification. But Gwendolen was apt to think rather of those who saw her than of those whom she could not see; and Rex was soon so far behind that if she had looked she would not have seen him. For I grieve to say that in the search for a gate, along a lane lately mended, Primrose fell, broke his knees, and undesignedly threw Rex over his head.

Fortunately a blacksmith’s son who also followed the hounds under disadvantages, namely, on foot (a loose way of hunting which had struck some even frivolous minds as immoral), was naturally also in the rear, and happened to be within sight of Rex’s misfortune. He ran to give help which was greatly needed, for Rex was a good deal stunned, and the complete recovery of sensation came in the form of pain. Joel Dagge on this occasion showed himself that most useful of personages, whose knowledge is of a kind suited to the immediate occasion: he not only knew perfectly well what was the matter with the horse, how far they were both from the nearest public-house and from Pennicote Rectory, and could certify to Rex that his shoulder was only a bit out of joint, but also offered experienced surgical aid.

‘Lord, sir, let me shove it in again for you! I’s see Nash the bonesetter do it, and done it myself for our little Sally twice over. It’s all one and the same, shoulders is. If you’ll trusten to me and tighten your mind up a bit, I’ll do it for you in no time.’

‘Come then, old fellow,’ said Rex, who could tighten his mind better than his seat in the saddle. And Joel managed the operation, though not without considerable expense of pain to his patient, who turned so pitiably pale while tightening his mind, that Joel remarked, ‘Ah, sir, you aren’t used to it, that’s how it is. I’s see lots and lots o’ joints out. I see a man with his eye pushed out once – that was a rum go as ever I see. You can’t have a bit o’ fun wi’out such a sort o’ things. But it went in again. I’s swallowed three teeth mysen, as sure as I’m alive. Now, sirrey’ (this was addressed to Primrose), ‘come alonk – you mustn’t make believe as you can’t.’

Joel being clearly a low character, it is happily not necessary to say more of him to the refined reader, than that he helped Rex to get home with as little delay as possible. There was no alternative but to get home, though all the while he was in anxiety about Gwendolen, and more miserable in the thought that she too might have had an accident, than in the pain of his own bruises and the annoyance he was about to cause his father. He comforted himself about her by reflecting that every one would be anxious to take care of her, and that some acquaintance would be sure to conduct her home.

Mr Gascoigne was already at home, and was writing letters in his study, when he was interrupted by seeing poor Rex come in with a face which was not the less handsome and ingratiating for being pale and a little distressed. He was secretly the favourite son, and a young portrait of the father; who, however, never treated him with any partiality – rather, with an extra rigour. Mr Gascoigne having inquired of Anna, knew that Rex had gone with Gwendolen to the meet at the Three Barns.

‘What’s the matter?’ he said, hastily, not laying down his pen.

‘I’m very sorry, sir, Primrose has fallen down and broken his knees.’

‘Where have you been with him?’ said Mr Gascoigne, with a touch of severity. He rarely gave way to temper.

‘To the Three Barns to see the hounds throw off.’

‘And you were fool enough to follow?’

‘Yes, sir. I didn’t go at any fences, but the horse got his leg into a hole.’

‘And you got hurt yourself, I hope, eh?’

‘I got my shoulder put out, but a young blacksmith put it in again for me. I’m just a little battered, that’s all.’

‘Well, sit down.’

‘I’m very sorry about the horse, sir. I knew it would be a vexation to you.’

‘And what has become of Gwendolen?’ said Mr Gascoigne, abruptly. Rex, who did not imagine that his father had made any inquiries about him, answered at first with a blush which was the more remarkable for his previous paleness. Then he said nervously –

‘I am anxious to know – I should like to go or send at once to Offendene – but she rides so well, and I think she would keep up – there would most likely be many round her.’

‘I suppose it was she who led you on, eh?’ said Mr Gascoigne, laying down his pen, leaning back in his chair, and looking at Rex with more marked examination.

‘It was natural for her to want to go; she didn’t intend it beforehand – she was led away by the spirit of the thing. And of course I went when she went.’

Mr Gascoigne left a brief interval of silence, and then said with quiet irony, ‘But now you observe, young gentleman, that you are not furnished with a horse which will enable you to play the squire to your cousin. You must give up that amusement. You have spoiled my nag for me, and that is enough mischief for one vacation. I shall beg you to get ready to start for Southampton to-morrow and join Stillfox, till you go up to Oxford with him. That will be good for your bruises as well as your studies.’

Poor Rex felt his heart swelling and comporting itself as if it had been no better than a girl’s.

‘I hope you will not insist on my going immediately, sir.’

‘Do you feel too ill?’

‘No, not that – but—’ here Rex bit his lips and felt the tears starting, to his great vexation; then he rallied and tried to say more firmly, ‘I want to go to Offendene – but I can go this evening.’

‘I am going there myself. I can bring word about Gwendolen, if that is what you want.’

Rex broke down. He thought he discerned an intention fatal to his happiness, nay, his life. He was accustomed to believe in his father’s penetration, and to expect firmness. ‘Father, I can’t go away without telling her that I love her, and knowing that she loves me.’

Mr Gascoigne was inwardly going through some self-rebuke for not being more wary, and was now really sorry for the lad; but every consideration was subordinate to that of using the wisest tactics in the case. He had quickly made up his mind, and could answer the more quietly –

‘My dear boy, you are too young to be taking momentous, decisive steps of that sort. This is a fancy which you have got into your head during an idle week or two: you must set to work at something and dismiss it. There is every reason against it. An engagement at your age would be totally rash and unjustifiable; and moreover, alliances between first cousins are undesirable. Make up your mind to a brief disappointment. Life is full of them. We have all got to be broken in; and this is a mild beginning for you.’

‘No, not mild. I can’t bear it. I shall be good for nothing. I shouldn’t mind anything, if it were settled between us. I could do anything then,’ said Rex, impetuously. ‘But it’s of no use to pretend that I will obey you. I can’t do it. If I said I would, I should be sure to break my word. I should see Gwendolen again.’

‘Well, wait till to-morrow morning that we may talk of the matter again – you will promise me that,’ said Mr Gascoigne, quietly; and Rex did not, could not refuse.

The Rector did not even tell his wife that he had any other reason for going to Offendene that evening than his desire to ascertain that Gwendolen had got home safely. He found her more than safe – elated. Mr Quallon, who had won the brush, had delivered the trophy to her, and she had brought it before her, fastened on the saddle; more than that, Lord Brackenshaw had conducted her home, and had shown himself delighted with her spirited riding. All this was told at once to her uncle, that he might see how well justified she had been in acting against his advice; and the prudential Rector did feel himself in a slight difficulty, for at that moment he was particularly sensible that it was his niece’s serious interest to be well regarded by the Brackenshaws, and their opinion as to her following the hounds really touched the essence of his objection. However, he was not obliged to say anything immediately, for Mrs Davilow followed up Gwendolen’s brief triumphant phrases with –

‘Still, I do hope you will not do it again, Gwendolen. I should never have a moment’s quiet. Her father died by an accident, you know.’

Here Mrs Davilow had turned away from Gwendolen, and looked at Mr Gascoigne.

‘Mamma dear,’ said Gwendolen, kissing her merrily, and passing over the question of the fears which Mrs Davilow had meant to account for, ‘children don’t take after their parents in broken legs.’

Not one word had yet been said about Rex. In fact there had been no anxiety about him at Offendene. Gwendolen had observed to her mamma, ‘Oh, he must have been left far behind, and gone home in despair,’

and it could not be denied that this was fortunate so far as it made way for Lord Brackenshaw's bringing her home. But now Mr Gascoigne said, with some emphasis, looking at Gwendolen –

'Well, the exploit has ended better for you than for Rex.'

'Yes, I daresay he had to make a terrible round. You have not taught Primrose to take the fences, uncle,' said Gwendolen, without the faintest shade of alarm in her looks and tone.

'Rex has had a fall,' said Mr Gascoigne, curtly, throwing himself into an arm-chair, resting his elbows and fitting his palms and fingers together, while he closed his lips and looked at Gwendolen, who said –

'Oh, poor fellow! he is not hurt, I hope?' with a correct look of anxiety such as elated mortals try to superinduce when their pulses are all the while quick with triumph; and Mrs Davilow, in the same moment, uttered a low 'Good heavens! There!'

Mr Gascoigne went on: 'He put his shoulder out, and got some bruises, I believe.' Here he made another little pause of observation; but Gwendolen, instead of any such symptoms as pallor and silence, had only deepened the compassionateness of her brow and eyes, and said again, 'Oh, poor fellow! it is nothing serious, then?' and Mr Gascoigne held his diagnosis complete. But he wished to make assurance doubly sure, and went on still with a purpose.

'He got his arm set again rather oddly. Some blacksmith – not a parishioner of mine – was on the field – a loose fish, I suppose, but handy, and set the arm for him immediately. So after all, I believe, I and Primrose come off worst. The horse's knees are cut to pieces. He came down in a hole, it seems, and pitched Rex over his head.'

Gwendolen's face had allowably become contented again, since Rex's arm had been reset; and now, at the descriptive suggestions in the latter part of her uncle's speech, her elated spirits made her features less manageable than usual; the smiles broke forth, and finally a descending scale of laughter.

'You are a pretty young lady – to laugh at other people's calamities,' said Mr Gascoigne, with a milder sense of disapprobation than if he had not had counteracting reasons to be glad that Gwendolen showed no deep feeling on the occasion.

'Pray forgive me, uncle. Now Rex is safe, it is so droll to fancy the figure he and Primrose would cut – in a lane all by themselves – only a blacksmith running up. It would make a capital caricature of "Following the hounds." '

Gwendolen rather valued herself on her superior freedom in laughing where others might only see matter for seriousness. Indeed, the laughter became her person so well that her opinion of its gracefulness was often shared by others; and it even entered into her uncle's course of thought at this moment, that it was no wonder a boy should be fascinated by this young witch – who, however, was more mischievous than could be desired.

'How can you laugh at broken bones, child?' said Mrs Davilow, still under her dominant anxiety. 'I wish we had never allowed you to have the horse. You will see that we were wrong,' she added, looking with a grave nod at Mr Gascoigne – 'at least I was, to encourage her in asking for it.'

'Yes, seriously, Gwendolen,' said Mr Gascoigne, in a judicious tone of rational advice to a person understood to be altogether rational, 'I strongly recommend you – I shall ask you to oblige me so far – not to repeat your adventure of to-day. Lord Brackenshaw is very kind, but I feel sure that he would concur with me in what I say. To be spoken of as "the young lady who hunts" by way of exception, would give a tone to the language about you which I am sure you would not like. Depend upon it, his lordship would not choose that Lady Beatrice or Lady Maria should hunt in this part of the country, if they were old enough to do so. When you are married, it will be different: you may do whatever your husband sanctions. But if you intend to hunt, you must marry a man who can keep horses.'

'I don't know why I should do anything so horrible as to marry without *that* prospect, at least,' said Gwendolen, pettishly. Her uncle's speech had given her annoyance, which she could not show more directly; but she felt that she was committing herself, and after moving carelessly to another part of the room, went out.

'She always speaks in that way about marriage,' said Mrs Davilow; 'but it will be different when she has seen the right person.'

'Her heart has never been in the least touched, that you know of?' said Mr Gascoigne.

Mrs Davilow shook her head silently. 'It was only last night she said to me, "Mamma, I wonder how girls manage to fall in love. It is easy to make them do it in books. But men are too ridiculous." '

Mr Gascoigne laughed a little, and made no further remark on the subject. The next morning at breakfast he said –

'How are your bruises, Rex?'

'Oh, not very mellow yet, sir, only beginning to turn a little.'

'You don't feel quite ready for a journey to Southampton?'

'Not quite,' answered Rex, with his heart metaphorically in his mouth.

‘Well, you can wait till to-morrow, and go to say good-bye to them at Offendene.’

Mrs Gascoigne, who now knew the whole affair, looked steadily at her coffee lest she also should begin to cry, as Anna was doing already.

Mr Gascoigne felt that he was applying a sharp remedy to poor Rex’s acute attack, but he believed it to be in the end the kindest. To let him know the hopelessness of his love from Gwendolen’s own lips might be curative in more ways than one.

‘I can only be thankful that she doesn’t care about him,’ said Mrs Gascoigne, when she joined her husband in his study. ‘There are things in Gwendolen I cannot reconcile myself to. My Anna is worth two of her, with all her beauty and talent. It looks so very ill in her that she will not help in the schools with Anna – not even in the Sunday-school. What you or I advise is of no consequence to her: and poor Fanny is completely under her thumb. But I know you think better of her,’ Mrs Gascoigne ended with a deferential hesitation.

‘Oh, my dear, there is no harm in the girl. It is only that she has a high spirit, and it will not do to hold the reins too tight. The point is, to get her well married. She has a little too much fire in her for her present life with her mother and sisters. It is natural and right that she should be married soon – not to a poor man, but one who can give her a fitting position.’

Presently Rex, with his arm in a sling, was on his two miles’ walk to Offendene. He was rather puzzled by the unconditional permission to see Gwendolen, but his father’s real ground of action could not enter into his conjectures. If it had, he would first have thought it horribly cold-blooded, and then have disbelieved in his father’s conclusions.

When he got to the house, everybody was there but Gwendolen. The four girls, hearing him speak in the hall, rushed out of the library, which was their schoolroom, and hung round him with compassionate inquiries about his arm. Mrs Davilow wanted to know exactly what had happened, and where the blacksmith lived, that she might make him a present; while Miss Merry, who took a subdued and melancholy part in all family affairs, doubted whether it would not be giving too much encouragement to that kind of character. Rex had never found the family troublesome before, but just now he wished them all away and Gwendolen there, and he was too uneasy for good-natured feigning. When at last he had said, ‘Where is Gwendolen?’ and Mrs Davilow had told Alice to go and see if her sister were come down, adding, ‘I sent up her breakfast this morning. She needed a long rest,’ – Rex took the shortest way out of his endurance by saying, almost impatiently, ‘Aunt, I want to speak to Gwendolen – I want to see her alone.’

‘Very well, dear; go into the drawing-room. I will send her there,’ said Mrs Davilow, who had observed that he was fond of being with Gwendolen, as was natural, but had not thought of this as having any bearing on the realities of life: it seemed merely part of the Christmas holidays which were spinning themselves out.

Rex for his part felt that the realities of life were all hanging on this interview. He had to walk up and down the drawing-room in expectation for nearly ten minutes – ample space for all imaginative fluctuations; yet, strange to say, he was unvaryingly occupied in thinking what and how much he could do, when Gwendolen had accepted him, to satisfy his father that the engagement was the most prudent thing in the world, since it inspired him with double energy for work. He was to be a lawyer, and what reason was there why he should not rise as high as Eldon did? He was forced to look at life in the light of his father’s mind.

But when the door opened and she whose presence he was longing for entered, there came over him suddenly and mysteriously a state of tremor and distrust which he had never felt before. Miss Gwendolen, simple as she stood there, in her black silk, cut square about the round white pillar of her throat, a black band fastening her hair which streamed backwards in smooth silky abundance, seemed more queenly than usual. Perhaps it was that there was none of the latent fun and tricksiness which had always pierced in her greeting of Rex. How much of this was due to her presentiment from what he had said yesterday that he was going to talk of love? How much from her desire to show regret about his accident? Something of both. But the wisdom of ages has hinted that there is a side of the bed which has a malign influence if you happen to get out on it; and this accident befalls some charming persons rather frequently. Perhaps it had befallen Gwendolen this morning. The hastening of her toilet, the way in which Bugle used the brush, the quality of the shilling serial mistakenly written for her amusement, the probabilities of the coming day, and, in short, social institutions generally, were all objectionable to her. It was not that she was out of temper, but that the world was not equal to the demands of her fine organism.

However it might be, Rex saw an awful majesty about her as she entered and put out her hand to him, without the least approach to a smile in eyes or mouth. The fun which had moved her in the evening had quite evaporated from the image of his accident, and the whole affair seemed stupid to her. But she said with perfect propriety, ‘I hope you are not much hurt, Rex; I deserve that you should reproach me for your accident.’

‘Not at all,’ said Rex, feeling the soul within him spreading itself like an attack of illness. ‘There is hardly anything the matter with me. I am so glad you had the pleasure: I would willingly pay for it by a tumble, only

I was sorry to break the horse's knees.'

Gwendolen walked to the hearth and stood looking at the fire in the most inconvenient way for conversation, so that he could only get a side view of her face.

'My father wants me to go to Southampton for the rest of the vacation,' said Rex, his barytone trembling a little.

'Southampton! That's a stupid place to go to, isn't it?' said Gwendolen, chilly.

'It would be to me, because you would not be there.'

Silence.

'Should you mind about my going away, Gwendolen?'

'Of course. Every one is of consequence in this dreary country,' said Gwendolen, curtly. The perception that poor Rex wanted to be tender made her curl up and harden like a sea-anemone at the touch of a finger.

'Are you angry with me, Gwendolen? Why do you treat me in this way all at once?' said Rex, flushing, and with more spirit in his voice, as if he too were capable of being angry.

Gwendolen looked round at him and smiled. 'Treat you? Nonsense! I am only rather cross. Why did you come so very early? You must expect to find tempers in dishabille.'

'Be as cross with me as you like – only don't treat me with indifference,' said Rex, imploringly. 'All the happiness of my life depends on your loving me – if only a little – better than any one else.'

He tried to take her hand, but she hastily eluded his grasp and moved to the other end of the hearth, facing him.

'Pray don't make love to me! I hate it.' She looked at him fiercely.

Rex turned pale and was silent, but could not take his eyes off her, and the impetus was not yet exhausted that made hers dart death at him. Gwendolen herself could not have foreseen that she should feel in this way. It was all a sudden, new experience to her. The day before she had been quite aware that her cousin was in love with her – she did not mind how much, so that he said nothing about it; and if any one had asked her why she objected to love-making speeches, she would have said laughingly, 'Oh, I am tired of them all in the books.' But now the life of passion had begun negatively in her. She felt passionately averse to this volunteered love.

To Rex at twenty the joy of life seemed at an end more absolutely than it can do to a man at forty. But before they had ceased to look at each other, he did speak again.

'Is that the last word you have to say to me, Gwendolen? Will it always be so?'

She could not help seeing his wretchedness and feeling a little regret for the old Rex who had not offended her. Decisively, but yet with some return of kindliness, she said –

'About making love? Yes. But I don't dislike you for anything else.'

There was just a perceptible pause before he said a low 'goodbye,' and passed out of the room. Almost immediately after, she heard the heavy hall-door bang behind him.

Mrs Davilow too had heard Rex's hasty departure, and presently came into the drawing-room, where she found Gwendolen seated on the low couch, her face buried, and her hair falling over her figure like a garment. She was sobbing bitterly. 'My child, my child, what is it?' cried the mother, who had never before seen her darling struck down in this way, and felt something of the alarmed anguish that women feel at the sight of overpowering sorrow in a strong man; for this child had been her ruler. Sitting down by her with circling arms, she pressed her cheek against Gwendolen's head, and then tried to draw it upward. Gwendolen gave way, and letting her head rest against her mother, cried out sobbingly, 'Oh mamma, what can become of my life? there is nothing worth living for!'

'Why, dear?' said Mrs Davilow. Usually she herself had been rebuked by her daughter for involuntary signs of despair.

'I shall never love anybody. I can't love people. I hate them.'

'The time will come, dear, the time will come.'

Gwendolen was more and more convulsed with sobbing; but putting her arms round her mother's neck with an almost painful clinging, she said brokenly, 'I can't bear any one to be very near me but you.'

Then the mother began to sob, for this spoiled child had never shown such dependence on her before: and so they clung to each other.

Chapter Eight

What name doth Joy most borrow
When life is fair?

'To-morrow.'

What name doth best fit Sorrow
In young despair?

'To-morrow.'

There was a much more lasting trouble at the Rectory. Rex arrived there only to throw himself on his bed in a state of apparent apathy, unbroken till the next day, when it began to be interrupted by more positive signs of illness. Nothing could be said about his going to Southampton: instead of that, the chief thought of his mother and Anna was how to tend this patient who did not want to be well, and from being the brightest, most grateful spirit in the household, was metamorphosed into an irresponsive, dull-eyed creature who met all affectionate attempts with a murmur of 'Let me alone.' His father looked beyond the crisis, and believed it to be the shortest way out of an unlucky affair; but he was sorry for the inevitable suffering, and went now and then to sit by him in silence for a few minutes, parting with a gentle pressure of his hand on Rex's blank brow, and a 'God bless you, my boy.' Warham and the younger children used to peep round the edge of the door to see this incredible thing of their lively brother being laid low; but fingers were immediately shaken at them to drive them back. The guardian who was always there was Anna, and her little hand was allowed to rest within her brother's, though he never gave it a welcoming pressure. Her soul was divided between anguish for Rex and reproach of Gwendolen.

'Perhaps it is wicked of me, but I think I never *can* love her again,' came as the recurrent burthen of poor little Anna's inward monody. And even Mrs Gascoigne had an angry feeling towards her niece which she could not refrain from expressing (apologetically) to her husband.

'I know of course it is better, and we ought to be thankful that she is not in love with the poor boy; but really, Henry, I think she is hard: she has the heart of a coquette. I cannot help thinking that she must have made him believe something, or the disappointment would not have taken hold of him in that way. And some blame attaches to poor Fanny; she is quite blind about that girl.'

Mr Gascoigne answered imperatively. 'The less said on that point the better, Nancy. I ought to have been more awake myself. As to the boy, be thankful if nothing worse ever happens to him. Let the thing die out as quickly as possible; and especially with regard to Gwendolen – let it be as if it had never been.'

The Rector's dominant feeling was that there had been a great escape. Gwendolen in love with Rex in return would have made a much harder problem, the solution of which might have been taken out of his hands. But he had to go through some further difficulty.

One fine morning Rex asked for his bath, and made his toilet as usual. Anna, full of excitement at this change, could do nothing but listen for his coming down, and at last hearing his step, ran to the foot of the stairs to meet him. For the first time he gave her a faint smile, but it looked so melancholy on his pale face that she could hardly help crying.

'Nannie!' he said, gently, taking her hand and leading her slowly along with him to the drawing-room. His mother was there, and when she came to kiss him, he said, 'What a plague I am!'

Then he sat still and looked out of the bow-window on the lawn and shrubs covered with hoar-frost, across which the sun was sending faint occasional gleams – something like that sad smile on Rex's face, Anna thought. He felt as if he had had a resurrection into a new world, and did not know what to do with himself there, the old interests being left behind. Anna sat near him, pretending to work, but really watching him with yearning looks. Beyond the garden hedge there was a road where waggons and carts sometimes went on field-work: a railed opening was made in the hedge, because the upland with its bordering wood and clump of ash-trees against the sky was a pretty sight. Presently there came along a waggon laden with timber; the horses were straining their grand muscles, and the driver having cracked his whip, ran along anxiously to guide the leader's head, fearing a swerve. Rex seemed to be shaken into attention, rose and looked till the last quivering trunk of the timber had disappeared, and then walked once or twice along the room. Mrs Gascoigne was no longer there, and when he came to sit down again, Anna, seeing a return of speech in her brother's eyes, could

not resist the impulse to bring a little stool and seat herself against his knee, looking up at him with an expression which seemed to say, 'Do speak to me.' And he spoke.

'I'll tell you what I'm thinking of, Nannie. I will go to Canada, or somewhere of that sort.' (Rex had not studied the character of our colonial possessions.)

'Oh, Rex, not for always!'

'Yes, to get my bread there. I should like to build a hut, and work hard at clearing, and have everything wild about me, and a great wide quiet.'

'And not take me with you?' said Anna, the big tears coming fast.

'How could I?'

'I should like it better than anything; and settlers go with their families. I would sooner go there than stay here in England. I could make the fires, and mend the clothes, and cook the food; and I could learn how to make the bread before we went. It would be nicer than anything – like playing at life over again, as we used to do when we made our tent with the drugget, and had our little plates and dishes.'

'Father and mother would not let you go.'

'Yes, I think they would, when I explained everything. It would save money; and papa would have more to bring up the boys with.'

There was further talk of the same practical kind at intervals, and it ended in Rex's being obliged to consent that Anna should go with him when he spoke to his father on the subject.

Of course it was when the Rector was alone in his study. Their mother would become reconciled to whatever he decided on; but mentioned to her first, the question would have distressed her.

'Well, my children!' said Mr Gascoigne, cheerfully, as they entered. It was a comfort to see Rex about again.

'May we sit down with you a little, papa?' said Anna. 'Rex has something to say.'

'With all my heart.'

It was a noticeable group that these three creatures made, each of them with a face of the same structural type – the straight brow, the nose suddenly straightened from an intention of being aquiline, the short upper lip, the short but strong and well-hung chin: there was even the same tone of complexion and set of the eye. The grey-haired father was at once massive and keen-looking; there was a perpendicular line in his brow which when he spoke with any force of interest deepened; and the habit of ruling gave him an air of reserved authoritativeness. Rex would have seemed a vision of the father's youth, if it had been possible to imagine Mr Gascoigne without distinct plans and without command, smitten with a heart sorrow, and having no more notion of concealment than a sick animal; and Anna was a tiny copy of Rex, with hair drawn back and knotted, her face following his in its changes of expression, as if they had one soul between them.

'You know all about what has upset me, father,' Rex began, and Mr Gascoigne nodded.

'I am quite done up for life in this part of the world. I am sure it will be no use my going back to Oxford. I couldn't do any reading. I should fail, and cause you expense for nothing. I want to have your consent to take another course, sir.'

Mr Gascoigne nodded more slowly, the perpendicular line on his brow deepened, and Anna's trembling increased.

'If you would allow me a small outfit, I should like to go to the colonies and work on the land there.' Rex thought the vagueness of the phrase prudential; 'the colonies' necessarily embracing more advantages, and being less capable of being rebutted on a single ground than any particular settlement.

'Oh, and with me, papa,' said Anna, not bearing to be left out from the proposal even temporarily. 'Rex would want some one to take care of him, you know – some one to keep house. And we shall never, either of us, be married. And I should cost nothing, and I should be so happy. I know it would be hard to leave you and mamma; but there are all the others to bring up, and we two should be no trouble to you any more.'

Anna had risen from her seat, and used the feminine argument of going closer to her papa as she spoke. He did not smile, but he drew her on his knee and held her there, as if to put her gently out of the question while he spoke to Rex.

'You will admit that my experience gives me some power of judging for you, and that I can probably guide you in practical matters better than you can guide yourself?'

Rex was obliged to say, 'Yes, sir.'

'And perhaps you will admit – though I don't wish to press that point – that you are bound in duty to consider my judgment and wishes?'

'I have never yet placed myself in opposition to you, sir.' Rex in his secret soul could not feel that he was bound not to go to the colonies, but to go to Oxford again – which was the point in question.

'But you will do so if you persist in setting your mind towards a rash and foolish procedure, and deafening yourself to considerations which my experience of life assures me of. You think, I suppose, that you have had a shock which has changed all your inclinations, stupefied your brains, unfitted you for anything but manual

labour, and given you a dislike to society? Is that what you believe?'

'Something like that I shall never be up to the sort of work I must do to live in this part of the world. I have not the spirit for it. I shall never be the same again. And without any disrespect to you, father, I think a young fellow should be allowed to choose his way of life, if he does nobody any harm. There are plenty to stay at home, and those who like might be allowed to go where there are empty places.'

'But suppose I am convinced on good evidence – as I am – that this state of mind of yours is transient, and that if you went off as you propose, you would by-and-by repent, and feel that you had let yourself slip back from the point you have been gaining by your education till now? Have you not strength of mind enough to see that you had better act on my assurance for a time, and test it? In my opinion, so far from agreeing with you that you should be free to turn yourself into a colonist and work in your shirt-sleeves with spade and hatchet – in my opinion you have no right whatever to expatriate yourself until you have honestly endeavoured to turn to account the education you have received here. I say nothing of the grief to your mother and me.'

'I'm very sorry; but what can I do? I can't study – that's certain,' said Rex.

'Not just now, perhaps. You will have to miss a term. I have made arrangements for you – how you are to spend the next two months. But I confess I am disappointed in you, Rex. I thought you had more sense than to take up such ideas – to suppose that because you have fallen into a very common trouble, such as most men have to go through, you are loosened from all bonds of duty – just as if your brain had softened and you were no longer a responsible being.'

What could Rex say? Inwardly he was in a state of rebellion, but he had no arguments to meet his father's; and while he was feeling, in spite of anything that might be said, that he should like to go off to 'the colonies' to-morrow, it lay in a deep fold of his consciousness that he ought to feel – if he had been a better fellow he would have felt – more about his old ties. This is the sort of faith we live by in our soul-sicknesses.

Rex got up from his seat, as if he held the conference to be at an end. 'You assent to my arrangement, then?' said Mr Gascoigne, with that distinct resolution of tone which seems to hold one in a vice.

There was a little pause before Rex answered, 'I'll try what I can do, sir. I can't promise.' His thought was, that trying would be of no use.

Her father kept Anna, holding her fast, though she wanted to follow Rex. 'Oh papa,' she said, the tears coming with her words when the door had closed; 'it is very hard for him. Doesn't he look ill?'

'Yes, but he will soon be better; it will all blow over. And now, Anna, be as quiet as a mouse about it all. Never let it be mentioned when he is gone.'

'No, papa. But I would not be like Gwendolen for anything – to have people fall in love with me so. It is very dreadful.'

Anna dared not say that she was disappointed at not being allowed to go to the colonies with Rex; but that was her secret feeling, and she often afterwards went inwardly over the whole affair, saying to herself, 'I should have done with going out, and gloves, and crinoline, and having to talk when I am taken to dinner – and all that!'

I like to mark the time, and connect the course of individual lives with the historic stream, for all classes of thinkers. This was the period when the broadening of gauge in crinolines seemed to demand an agitation for the general enlargement of churches, ballrooms, and vehicles. But Anna Gascoigne's figure would only allow the size of skirt manufactured for young ladies of fourteen.

Chapter Nine

I'll tell thee, Berthold, what men's hopes are like:
A silly child that, quivering with joy,
Would cast its little mimic fishing-line
Baited with loadstone for a bowl of toys
In the salt ocean.

Eight months after the arrival of the family at Offendene, that is to say in the end of the following June, a rumour was spread in the neighbourhood which to many persons was matter of exciting interest. It had no reference to the results of the American war, but it was one which touched all classes within a certain circuit round Wanchester: the corn-factors, the brewers, the horse-dealers, and saddlers, all held it a laudable thing, and one which was to be rejoiced in on abstract grounds, as showing the value of an aristocracy in a free country like England; the blacksmith in the hamlet of Diplow felt that a good time had come round; the wives of labouring men hoped their nimble boys of ten or twelve would be taken into employ by the gentlemen in livery; and the farmers about Diplow admitted, with a tincture of bitterness and reserve, that a man might now again perhaps have an easier market or exchange for a rick of old hay or a waggon-load of straw. If such were the hopes of low persons not in society, it may be easily inferred that their betters had better reasons for satisfaction, probably connected with the pleasures of life rather than its business. Marriage, however, must be considered as coming under both heads; and just as when a visit of majesty is announced, the dream of knighthood or a baronetcy is to be found under various municipal nightcaps, so the news in question raised a floating indeterminate vision of marriage in several well-bred imaginations.

The news was that Diplow Hall, Sir Hugo Mallinger's place, which had for a couple of years turned its white window-shutters in a painfully wall-eyed manner on its fine elms and beeches, its lilied pool and grassy acres specked with deer, was being prepared for a tenant, and was for the rest of the summer and through the hunting season to be inhabited in a fitting style both as to house and stable. But not by Sir Hugo himself: by his nephew Mr Mallinger Grandcourt, who was presumptive heir to the baronetcy, his uncle's marriage having produced nothing but girls. Nor was this the only contingency with which fortune flattered young Grandcourt, as he was pleasantly called; for while the chance of the baronetcy came through his father, his mother had given a baronial streak to his blood, so that if certain intervening persons slightly painted in the middle distance died, he would become a baron and peer of this realm.

It is the uneven allotment of nature that the male bird alone has the tuft, but we have not yet followed the advice of hasty philosophers who would have us copy nature entirely in these matters; and if Mr Mallinger Grandcourt became a baronet or a peer, his wife would share the title – which in addition to his actual fortune was certainly a reason why that wife, being at present unchosen, should be thought of by more than one person with sympathetic interest as a woman sure to be well provided for.

Some readers of this history will doubtless regard it as incredible that people should construct matrimonial prospects on the mere report that a bachelor of good fortune and possibilities was coming within reach, and will reject the statement as a mere outflow of gall: they will aver that neither they nor their first cousins have minds so unbridled; and that in fact this is not human nature, which would know that such speculations might turn out to be fallacious, and would therefore not entertain them. But, let it be observed, nothing is here narrated of human nature generally: the history in its present stage concerns only a few people in a corner of Wessex – whose reputation, however, was unimpeached, and who, I am in the proud position of being able to state, were all on visiting terms with persons of rank.

There were the Arrowpoints, for example, in their beautiful place at Quetcham: no one could attribute sordid views in relation to their daughter's marriage to parents who could leave her at least half a million; but having affectionate anxieties about their Catherine's position (she having resolutely refused Lord Slogan, an unexceptionable Irish peer, whose estate wanted nothing but drainage and population), they wondered, perhaps from something more than a charitable impulse, whether Mr Grandcourt was good-looking, of sound constitution, virtuous or at least reformed, and if liberal-conservative, not too liberal-conservative; and without wishing anybody to die, thought his succession to the title an event to be desired.

If the Arrowpoints had such ruminations, it is the less surprising that they were stimulated in Mr Gascoigne,

who for being a clergyman was not the less subject to the anxieties of a parent and guardian; and we have seen how both he and Mrs Gascoigne might by this time have come to feel that he was overcharged with the management of young creatures who were hardly to be held in with bit or bridle, or any sort of metaphor that would stand for judicious advice.

Naturally, people did not tell each other all they felt and thought about young Grandcourt's advent: on no subject is this openness found prudentially practicable – not even on the generation of acids, or the destination of the fixed stars; for either your contemporary with a mind turned towards the same subjects may find your ideas ingenious and forestall you in applying them, or he may have other views on acids and fixed stars, and think ill of you in consequence. Mr Gascoigne did not ask Mr Arrowpoint if he had any trustworthy source of information about Grandcourt considered as a husband for a charming girl; nor did Mrs Arrowpoint observe to Mrs Davilow that if the possible peer sought a wife in the neighbourhood of Diplow, the only reasonable expectation was that he would offer his hand to Catherine, who, however, would not accept him unless he were in all respects fitted to secure her happiness. Indeed, even to his wife the Rector was silent as to the contemplation of any matrimonial result, from the probability that Mr Grandcourt would see Gwendolen at the next Archery Meeting; though Mrs Gascoigne's mind was very likely still more active in the same direction. She had said interjectionally to her sister, 'It would be a mercy, Fanny, if that girl were well married!' to which Mrs Davilow, discerning some criticism of her darling in the fervour of that wish, had not chosen to make any audible reply, though she had said inwardly, 'You will not get her to marry for your pleasure;' the mild mother becoming rather saucy when she identified herself with her daughter.

To her husband Mrs Gascoigne said, 'I hear Mr Grandcourt has two places of his own, but he comes to Diplow for the hunting. It is to be hoped he will set a good example in the neighbourhood. Have you heard what sort of young man he is, Henry?'

Mr Gascoigne had not heard; at least, if his male acquaintances had gossiped in his hearing, he was not disposed to repeat their gossip, or give it any emphasis in his own mind. He held it futile, even if it had been becoming, to show any curiosity as to the past of a young man whose birth, wealth, and consequent leisure made many habits venial which under other circumstances would have been inexcusable. Whatever Grandcourt had done, he had not ruined himself; and it is well known that in gambling, for example, whether of the business or holiday sort, a man who has the strength of mind to leave off when he has only ruined others, is a reformed character. This is an illustration merely: Mr Gascoigne had not heard that Grandcourt had been a gambler, and we can hardly pronounce him singular in feeling that a landed proprietor with a mixture of noble blood in his veins was not to be an object of suspicious inquiry like a reformed character who offers himself as your butler or footman. Reformation, where a man can afford to do without it, can hardly be other than genuine. Moreover, it was not certain on any showing hitherto that Mr Grandcourt had needed reformation more than other young men in the ripe youth of five-and-thirty; and, at any rate, the significance of what he had been must be determined by what he actually was.

Mrs Davilow, too, although she would not respond to her sister's pregnant remark, could not be inwardly indifferent to an event that might promise a brilliant lot for Gwendolen. A little speculation on 'what may be' comes naturally, without encouragement – comes inevitably in the form of images, when unknown persons are mentioned; and Mr Grandcourt's name raised in Mrs Davilow's mind first of all the picture of a handsome, accomplished, excellent young man whom she would be satisfied with as a husband for her daughter; but then came the further speculation – would Gwendolen be satisfied with him? There was no knowing what would meet that girl's taste or touch her affections – it might be something else than excellence; and thus the image of the perfect suitor gave way before a fluctuating combination of qualities that might be imagined to win Gwendolen's heart. In the difficulty of arriving at the particular combination which would ensure that result, the mother even said to herself, 'It would not signify about her being in love, if she would only accept the right person.' For whatever marriage had been for herself, how could she the less desire it for her daughter? The difference her own misfortunes made was, that she never dared to dwell much to Gwendolen on the desirableness of marriage, dreading an answer something like that of the future Madame Roland, when her gentle mother urging the acceptance of a suitor, said, 'Tu seras heureuse, ma chère.' 'Oui, maman, comme toi.'[4]

In relation to the problematic Mr Grandcourt least of all would Mrs Davilow have willingly let fall a hint of the aerial castle-building which she had the good taste to be ashamed of; for such a hint was likely enough to give an adverse poise to Gwendolen's own thought, and make her detest the desirable husband beforehand. Since that scene after poor Rex's farewell visit, the mother had felt a new sense of peril in touching the mystery of her child's feeling, and in rashly determining what was her welfare: only she could think of welfare in no other shape than marriage.

The discussion of the dress that Gwendolen was to wear at the Archery Meeting was a relevant topic, however; and when it had been decided that as a touch of colour on her white cashmere, nothing, for her

complexion, was comparable to pale green – a feather which she was trying in her hat before the looking-glass having settled the question – Mrs Davilow felt her ears tingle when Gwendolen, suddenly throwing herself into the attitude of drawing her bow, said with a look of comic enjoyment –

'How I pity all the other girls at the Archery Meeting – all thinking of Mr Grandcourt! And they have not a shadow of a chance.'

Mrs Davilow had not presence of mind to answer immediately, and Gwendolen turned quickly round towards her, saying, wickedly –

'Now you know they have not, mamma. You and my uncle and aunt – you all intend him to fall in love with me.'

Mrs Davilow, piqued into a little stratagem, said, 'Oh, my dear, that is not so certain. Miss Arrowpoint has charms which you have not.'

'I know; but they demand thought. My arrow will pierce him before he has time for thought. He will declare himself my slave – I shall send him round the world to bring me back the wedding-ring of a happy woman – in the meantime all the men who are between him and the title will die of different diseases – he will come back Lord Grandcourt – but without the ring – and fall at my feet. I shall laugh at him – he will rise in resentment – I shall laugh more – he will call for his steed and ride to Quetcham, where he will find Miss Arrowpoint just married to a needy musician, Mrs Arrowpoint tearing her cap off, and Mr Arrowpoint standing by. Exit Lord Grandcourt, who returns to Diplow, and, like M. Jabot, *change de linge*.'[5]

Was ever any young witch like this? You thought of hiding things from her – sat upon your secret and looked innocent, and all the while she knew by the corner of your eye that it was exactly five pounds ten you were sitting on! As well turn the key to keep out the damp! It was probable that by dint of divination she already knew more than any one else did of Mr Grandcourt. That idea in Mrs Davilow's mind prompted the sort of question which often comes without any other apparent reason than the faculty of speech and the not knowing what to do with it.

'Why, what kind of man do you imagine him to be, Gwendolen?'

'Let me see!' said the witch, putting her forefinger to her lips with a little frown, and then stretching out the finger with decision. 'Short – just above my shoulder – trying to make himself tall by turning up his mustache and keeping his beard long – a glass in his right eye to give him an air of distinction – a strong opinion about his waistcoat, but uncertain and trimming about the weather, on which he will try to draw me out. He will stare at me all the while, and the glass in his eye will cause him to make horrible faces, especially when he smiles in a flattering way. I shall cast down my eyes in consequence, and he will perceive that I am not indifferent to his attentions. I shall dream that night that I am looking at the extraordinary face of a magnified insect – and the next morning he will make me an offer of his hand; the sequel as before.'

'That is a portrait of some one you have seen already, Gwen. Mr Grandcourt may be a delightful young man for what you know.'

'Oh yes,' said Gwendolen, with a high note of careless admission, taking off her best hat and turning it round on her hand contemplatively. 'I wonder what sort of behaviour a delightful young man would have?' Then, with a merry change of face, 'I know he would have hunters and racers, and a London house and two country-houses, – one with battlements and another with a veranda. And I feel sure that with a little murdering he might get a title.'

The irony of this speech was of the doubtful sort that has some genuine belief mixed up with it. Poor Mrs Davilow felt uncomfortable under it. Her own meanings being usually literal and in intention innocent; and she said, with a distressed brow –

'Don't talk in that way, child, for heaven's sake! you do read such books – they give you such ideas of everything. I declare when your aunt and I were your age we knew nothing about wickedness. I think it was better so.'

'Why did you not bring me up in that way, mamma?' said Gwendolen. But immediately perceiving in the crushed look and rising sob that she had given a deep wound, she tossed down her hat and knelt at her mother's feet, crying –

'Mamma, mamma! I was only speaking in fun. I meant nothing.'

'How could I, Gwendolen?' said poor Mrs Davilow, unable to hear the retractation, and sobbing violently while she made the effort to speak. 'Your will was always too strong for me – if everything else had been different.'

This disjointed logic was intelligible enough to the daughter. 'Dear mamma, I don't find fault with you – I love you,' said Gwendolen, really compunctious. 'How can you help what I am? Besides, I am very charming. Come, now.' Here Gwendolen with her handkerchief gently rubbed away her mother's tears. 'Really – I am contented with myself. I like myself better than I should have liked my aunt and you. How dreadfully dull you must have been!'

Such tender cajolery served to quiet the mother, as it had often done before after like collisions. Not that the collisions had often been repeated at the same point; for in the memory of both they left an association of dread with the particular topics which had occasioned them: Gwendolen dreaded the unpleasant sense of compunction towards her mother, which was the nearest approach to self-condemnation and self-distrust that she had known; and Mrs Davilow's timid maternal conscience dreaded whatever had brought on the slightest hint of reproach. Hence, after this little scene, the two concurred in excluding Mr Grandcourt from their conversation.

When Mr Gascoigne once or twice referred to him, Mrs Davilow feared lest Gwendolen should betray some of her alarming keen-sightedness about what was probably in her uncle's mind; but the fear was not justified. Gwendolen knew certain differences in the characters with which she was concerned as birds know climate and weather; and, for the very reason that she was determined to evade her uncle's control, she was determined not to clash with him. The good understanding between them was much fostered by their enjoyment of archery together: Mr Gascoigne, as one of the best bowmen in Wessex, was gratified to find the elements of like skill in his niece; and Gwendolen was the more careful not to lose the shelter of his fatherly indulgence, because since the trouble with Rex both Mrs Gascoigne and Anna had been unable to hide what she felt to be a very unreasonable alienation from her. Towards Anna she took some pains to behave with a regretful affectionateness; but neither of them dared to mention Rex's name, and Anna, to whom the thought of him was part of the air she breathed, was ill at ease with the lively cousin who had ruined his happiness. She tried dutifully to repress any sign of her changed feeling; but who in pain can imitate the glance and hand-touch of pleasure?

This unfair resentment had rather a hardening effect on Gwendolen, and threw her into a more defiant temper. Her uncle too might be offended if she refused the next person who fell in love with her; and one day when that idea was in her mind she said –

'Mamma, I see now why girls are glad to be married – to escape being expected to please everybody but themselves.'

Happily, Mr Middleton was gone without having made any avowal; and notwithstanding the admiration for the handsome Miss Harleth, extending perhaps over thirty square miles in a part of Wessex well studded with families whose members included several disengaged young men, each glad to seat himself by the lively girl with whom it was so easy to get on in conversation, – notwithstanding these grounds for arguing that Gwendolen was likely to have other suitors more explicit than the cautious curate, the fact was not so.

Care has been taken not only that the trees should not sweep the stars down, but also that every man who admires a fair girl should not be enamoured of her, and even that every man who is enamoured should not necessarily declare himself. There are various refined shapes in which the price of corn, known to be a potent cause in this relation, might, if inquired into, show why a young lady, perfect in person, accomplishments, and costume, has not the trouble of rejecting many offers; and nature's order is certainly benignant in not obliging us one and all to be desperately in love with the most admirable mortal we have ever seen. Gwendolen, we know, was far from holding that supremacy in the minds of all observers. Besides, it was but a poor eight months since she had come to Offendene, and some inclinations become manifest slowly, like the sunward creeping of plants.

In face of this fact that not one of the eligible young men already in the neighbourhood had made Gwendolen an offer, why should Mr Grandcourt be thought of as likely to do what they had left undone?

Perhaps because he was thought of as still more eligible; since a great deal of what passes for likelihood in the world is simply the reflex of a wish. Mr and Mrs Arrowpoint, for example, having no anxiety that Miss Harleth should make a brilliant marriage, had quite a different likelihood in their minds.

Chapter Ten

1st Gent. What woman should be? Sir, consult the taste
Of marriageable men. This planet's store
In iron, cotton, wool, or chemicals –
All matter rendered to our plastic skill,
Is wrought in shapes responsive to demand:
The market's pulse makes index high or low,
By rule sublime. Our daughters must be wives,
And to be wives must be what men will choose:
Men's taste is women's test. You mark the phrase?
'Tis good, I think? – the sense well winged and poised
With t's and s's.

2nd Gent. Nay, but turn it round:
Give us the test of taste. A fine *menu* –
Is it to-day what Roman epicures
Insisted that a gentleman must eat
To earn the dignity of dining well?

Brackenshaw Park, where the Archery Meeting was held, looked out from its gentle heights far over the neighbouring valley to the outlying eastern downs and the broad slow rise of cultivated country hanging like a vast curtain towards the west. The castle, which stood on the highest platform of the clustered hills, was built of roughhewn limestone, full of lights and shadows made by the dark dust of lichens and the washings of the rain. Masses of beech and fir sheltered it on the north, and spread down here and there along the green slopes like flocks seeking the water which gleamed below. The archery-ground was a carefully-kept enclosure on a bit of table-land at the farthest end of the park, protected towards the south-west by tall elms and a thick screen of hollies, which kept the gravel walk and the bit of newly-mown turf where the targets were placed in agreeable afternoon shade. The Archery Hall with an arcade in front showed like a white temple against the greenery on the northern side.

What could make a better background for the flower-groups of ladies, moving and bowing and turning their necks as it would become the leisurely lilies to do if they took to locomotion? The sounds too were very pleasant to hear, even when the military band from Wanchester ceased to play: musical laughs in all the registers and a harmony of happy friendly speeches, now rising towards mild excitement, now sinking to an agreeable murmur.

No open-air amusement could be much freer from those noisy, crowding conditions which spoil most modern pleasures; no Archery Meeting could be more select, the number of friends accompanying the members being restricted by an award of tickets, so as to keep the maximum within the limits of convenience for the dinner and ball to be held in the castle. Within the enclosure no plebeian spectators were admitted except Lord Brackenshaw's tenants and their families, and of these it was chiefly the feminine members who used the privilege, bringing their little boys and girls or younger brothers and sisters. The males among them relieved the insipidity of the entertainment by imaginative betting, in which the stake was 'anything you like,' on their favourite archers; but the young maidens, having a different principle of discrimination, were considering which of those sweetly-dressed ladies they would choose to be, if the choice were allowed them. Probably the form these rural souls would most have striven for as a tabernacle was some other than Gwendolen's – one with more pink in her cheeks and hair of the most fashionable yellow; but among the male judges in the ranks immediately surrounding her there was unusual unanimity in pronouncing her the finest girl present.

No wonder she enjoyed her existence on that July day. Pre-eminence is sweet to those who love it, even under mediocre circumstances: perhaps it is not quite mythical that a slave has been proud to be bought first; and probably a barn-door fowl on sale, though he may not have understood himself to be called the best of a bad lot, may have a self-informed consciousness of his relative importance, and strut consoled. But for complete enjoyment the outward and the inward must concur. And that concurrence was happening to Gwendolen.

Who can deny that bows and arrows are among the prettiest weapons in the world for feminine forms to

play with? They prompt attitudes full of grace and power, where that fine concentration of energy seen in all marksmanship, is freed from associations of bloodshed. The time-honoured British resource of 'killing something' is no longer carried on with bow and quiver; bands defending their passes against an invading nation fight under another sort of shade than a cloud of arrows; and poisoned darts are harmless survivals either in rhetoric or in regions comfortably remote. Archery has no ugly smell of brimstone; breaks nobody's shins, breeds no athletic monsters; its only danger is that of failing, which for generous blood is enough to mould skilful action. And among the Brackenshaw archers the prizes were all of the nobler symbolic kind: not property to be carried off in a parcel, degrading honour into gain; but the gold arrow and the silver, the gold star and the silver, to be worn for a time in sign of achievement and then transferred to the next who did excellently. These signs of pre-eminence had the virtue of wreaths without their inconveniences, which might have produced a melancholy effect in the heat of the ball-room. Altogether the Brackenshaw Archery Club was an institution framed with good taste, so as not to have by necessity any ridiculous incidents.

And to-day all incalculable elements were in its favour. There was mild warmth, and no wind to disturb either hair or drapery or the course of the arrow; all skilful preparation had fair play, and when there was a general march to extract the arrows, the promenade of joyous young creatures in light speech and laughter, the graceful movement in common towards a common object, was a show worth looking at. Here Gwendolen seemed a Calypso among her nymphs. It was in her attitudes and movements that every one was obliged to admit her surpassing charm.

'That girl is like a high-mettled racer,' said Lord Brackenshaw to young Clintock, one of the invited spectators.

'First chop! tremendously pretty too,' said the elegant Grecian, who had been paying her assiduous attention; 'I never saw her look better.'

Perhaps she had never looked so well. Her face was beaming with young pleasure in which there were no malign rays of discontent; for being satisfied with her own chances, she felt kindly towards everybody and was satisfied with the universe. Not to have the highest distinction in rank, not to be marked out as an heiress, like Miss Arrowpoint, gave an added triumph in eclipsing those advantages. For personal recommendation she would not have cared to change the family group accompanying her for any other: her mamma's appearance would have suited an amiable duchess; her uncle and aunt Gascoigne with Anna made equally gratifying figures in their way; and Gwendolen was too full of joyous belief in herself to feel in the least jealous though Miss Arrowpoint was one of the best archeresses.

Even the reappearance of the formidable Herr Klesmer, which caused some surprise in the rest of the company, seemed only to fall in with Gwendolen's inclination to be amused. Short of Apollo himself, what great musical *maestro* could make a good figure at an archery meeting? There was a very satirical light in Gwendolen's eyes as she looked towards the Arrowpoint party on their first entrance, when the contrast between Klesmer and the average group of English county people seemed at its utmost intensity in the close neighbourhood of his hosts – or patrons, as Mrs Arrowpoint would have liked to hear them called, that she might deny the possibility of any longer patronising genius, its royalty being universally acknowledged. The contrast might have amused a graver personage than Gwendolen. We English are a miscellaneous people, and any chance fifty of us will present many varieties of animal architecture or facial ornament; but it must be admitted that our prevailing expression is not that of a lively, impassioned race, preoccupied with the ideal and carrying the real as a mere make-weight. The strong point of the English gentleman pure is the easy style of his figure and clothing; he objects to marked ins and outs in his costume, and he also objects to looking inspired.

Fancy an assemblage where the men had all that ordinary stamp of the well-bred Englishman, watching the entrance of Herr Klesmer – his mane of hair floating backward in massive inconsistency with the chimney-pot hat, which had the look of having been put on for a joke above his pronounced but well-modelled features and powerful clear-shaven mouth and chin; his tall thin figure clad in a way which, not being strictly English, was all the worse for its apparent emphasis of intention. Draped in a loose garment with a Florentine *berretta* on his head, he would have been fit to stand by the side of Leonardo da Vinci; but how when he presented himself in trousers which were not what English feeling demanded about the knees? – and when the fire that showed itself in his glances and the movements of his head, as he looked round him with curiosity, was turned into comedy by a hat which ruled that mankind should have well-cropped hair and a staid demeanour, such, for example, as Mr Arrowpoint's, whose nullity of face and perfect tailoring might pass everywhere without ridicule? One sees why it is often better for greatness to be dead, and to have got rid of the outward man.

Many present knew Klesmer, or knew of him; but they had only seen him on candle-light occasions when he appeared simply as a musician, and he had not yet that supreme, world-wide celebrity which makes an artist great to the most ordinary people by their knowledge of his great expensiveness. It was literally a new light for them to see him in – presented unexpectedly on this July afternoon in an exclusive society: some were

inclined to laugh, others felt a little disgust at the want of judgment shown by the Arrowpoints in this use of an introductory card.

'What extreme guys those artistic fellows usually are!' said young Clintock to Gwendolen. 'Do look at the figure he cuts, bowing with his hand on his heart to Lady Brackenshaw – and Mrs Arrowpoint's feather just reaching his shoulder.'

'You are one of the profane,' said Gwendolen. 'You are blind to the majesty of genius. Herr Klesmer smites me with awe; I feel crushed in his presence; my courage all oozes from me.'

'Ah, you understand all about his music.'

'No, indeed,' said Gwendolen, with a light laugh; 'it is he who understands all about mine and thinks it pitiable.' Klesmer's verdict on her singing had been an easier joke to her since he had been struck by her *plastik*.

'It is not addressed to the ears of the future, I suppose. I'm glad of that: it suits mine.'

'Oh, you are very kind. But how remarkably well Miss Arrowpoint looks to-day! She would make quite a fine picture in that gold-coloured dress.'

'Too splendid, don't you think?'

'Well, perhaps a little too symbolical – too much like the figure of Wealth in an allegory.'

This speech of Gwendolen's had rather a malicious sound, but it was not really more than a bubble of fun. She did not wish Miss Arrowpoint or any one else to be out of the way, believing in her own good fortune even more than in her skill. The belief in both naturally grew stronger as the shooting went on, for she promised to achieve one of the best scores – a success which astonished every one in a new member; and to Gwendolen's temperament one success determined another. She trod on air, and all things pleasant seemed possible. The hour was enough for her, and she was not obliged to think what she should do next to keep her life at the due pitch.

'How does the scoring stand, I wonder?' said Lady Brackenshaw, a gracious personage who, adorned with two fair little girls and a boy of stout make, sat as lady paramount. Her lord had come up to her in one of the intervals of shooting. 'It seems to me that Miss Harleth is likely to win the gold arrow.'

'Gad, I think she will, if she carries it on! she is running Juliet Fenn hard. It is wonderful for one in her first year. Catherine is not up to her usual mark,' continued his lordship, turning to the heiress's mother who sat near. 'But she got the gold arrow last time. And there's a luck even in these games of skill. That's better. It gives the hinder ones a chance.'

'Catherine will be very glad for others to win,' said Mrs Arrowpoint, 'she is so magnanimous. It was entirely her considerateness that made us bring Herr Klesmer instead of Canon Stopley, who had expressed a wish to come. For her own pleasure, I am sure she would rather have brought the Canon; but she is always thinking of others. I told her it was not quite *en règle* to bring one so far out of our own set; but she said "Genius itself is not *en règle*; it comes into the world to make new rules." And one must admit that.'

'Ay, to be sure,' said Lord Brackenshaw, in a tone of careless dismissal, adding quickly, 'For my part, I am not magnanimous; I should like to win. But, confound it! I never have the chance now. I'm getting old and idle. The young ones beat me. As old Nestor says – the gods don't give us everything at one time: I was a young fellow once, and now I am getting an old and wise one. Old, at any rate; which is a gift that comes to everybody if they live long enough, so it raises no jealousy.' The Earl smiled comfortably at his wife.

'Oh, my lord, people who have been neighbours twenty years must not talk to each other about age,' said Mrs Arrowpoint. 'Years, as the Tuscans say, are made for the letting of houses. But where is our new neighbour? I thought Mr Grandcourt was to be here today.'

'Ah, by the way, so he was. The time's getting on too,' said his lordship, looking at his watch. 'But he only got to Diplow the other day. He came to us on Tuesday and said he had been a little bothered. He may have been pulled in another direction. Why, Gascoigne!' – the Rector was just then crossing at a little distance with Gwendolen on his arm, and turned in compliance with the call – 'this is a little too bad; you not only beat us yourself, but you bring up your niece to beat all the archeresses.'

'It *is* rather scandalous in her to get the better of elder members,' said Mr Gascoigne, with much inward satisfaction curling his short upper lip. 'But it is not my doing, my lord. I only meant her to make a tolerable figure, without surpassing any one.'

'It is not my fault, either,' said Gwendolen, with pretty archness. 'If I am to aim, I can't help hitting.'

'Ay, ay, that may be a fatal business for some people,' said Lord Brackenshaw, good-humouredly; then taking out his watch and looking at Mrs Arrowpoint again – 'The time's getting on, as you say. But Grandcourt is always late. I notice in town he's always late, and he's no bowman – understands nothing about it. But I told him he must come; he would see the flower of the neighbourhood here. He asked about you – had seen Arrowpoint's card. I think you had not made his acquaintance in town. He has been a good deal abroad. People don't know him much.'

‘No; we are strangers,’ said Mrs Arrowpoint. ‘But that is not what might have been expected. For his uncle Sir Hugo Mallinger and I are great friends when we meet.’

‘I don’t know; uncles and nephews are not so likely to be seen together as uncles and nieces,’ said his lordship, smiling towards the Rector. ‘But just come with me one instant, Gascoigne, will you? I want to speak a word about the clout-shooting.’

Gwendolen chose to go too and be deposited in the same group with her mamma and aunt until she had to shoot again. That Mr Grandcourt might after all not appear on the archery-ground, had begun to enter into Gwendolen’s thought as a possible deduction from the completeness of her pleasure. Under all her saucy satire, provoked chiefly by her divination that her friends thought of him as a desirable match for her, she felt something very far from indifference as to the impression she would make on him. True, he was not to have the slightest power over her (for Gwendolen had not considered that the desire to conquer is itself a sort of subjection); she had made up her mind that he was to be one of those complimentary and assiduously admiring men of whom even her narrow experience had shown her several with various-coloured beards and various styles of bearing; and the sense that her friends would want her to think him delightful, gave her a resistant inclination to presuppose him ridiculous. But that was no reason why she could spare his presence: and even a passing prevision of trouble in case she despised and refused him, raised not the shadow of a wish that he should save her that trouble by showing no disposition to make her an offer. Mr Grandcourt taking hardly any notice of her, and becoming shortly engaged to Miss Arrowpoint, was not a picture which flattered her imagination.

Hence Gwendolen had been all ear to Lord Brackenshaw’s mode of accounting for Grandcourt’s non-appearance; and when he did arrive, no consciousness – not even Mrs Arrowpoint’s or Mr Gascoigne’s – was more awake to the fact than hers, although she steadily avoided looking towards any point where he was likely to be. There should be no slightest shifting of angles to betray that it was of any consequence to her whether the much-talked-of Mr Mallinger Grandcourt presented himself or not. She became again absorbed in the shooting, and so resolutely abstained from looking round observantly that, even supposing him to have taken a conspicuous place among the spectators, it might be clear she was not aware of him. And all the while the certainty that he was there made a distinct thread in her consciousness. Perhaps her shooting was the better for it: at any rate, it gained in precision, and she at last raised a delightful storm of clapping and applause by three hits running in the gold – a feat which among the Brackenshaw archers had not the vulgar reward of a shilling poll-tax, but that of a special gold star to be worn on the breast. That moment was not only a happy one to herself – it was just what her mamma and her uncle would have chosen for her. There was a general falling into ranks to give her space that she might advance conspicuously to receive the gold star from the hands of Lady Brackenshaw; and the perfect movement of her fine form was certainly a pleasant thing to behold in the clear afternoon light when the shadows were long and still. She was the central object of that pretty picture, and every one present must gaze at her. That was enough: she herself was determined to see nobody in particular, or to turn her eyes any way except towards Lady Brackenshaw, but her thoughts undeniably turned in other ways. It entered a little into her pleasure that Herr Klesmer must be observing her at a moment when music was out of the question, and his superiority very far in the background; for vanity is as ill at ease under indifference as tenderness is under a love which it cannot return; and the unconquered Klesmer threw a trace of his malign power even across her pleasant consciousness that Mr Grandcourt was seeing her to the utmost advantage, and was probably giving her an admiration unmixed with criticism. She did not expect to admire *him*, but that was not necessary to her peace of mind.

Gwendolen met Lady Brackenshaw’s gracious smile without blushing (which only came to her when she was taken by surprise), but with a charming gladness of expression, and then bent with easy grace to have the star fixed near her shoulder. That little ceremony had been over long enough for her to have exchanged playful speeches and received congratulations as she moved among the groups who were now interesting themselves in the results of the scoring; but it happened that she stood outside examining the point of an arrow with rather an absent air when Lord Brackenshaw came up to her and said –

‘Miss Harleth, here is a gentleman who is not willing to wait any longer for an introduction. He has been getting Mrs Davilow to send me with him. Will you allow me to introduce Mr Mallinger Grandcourt?’

BOOK TWO

Meeting Streams

Chapter Eleven

The beginning of an acquaintance whether with persons or things is to get a definite outline for our ignorance.

Mr Grandcourt's wish to be introduced had no suddenness for Gwendolen; but when Lord Brackenshaw moved aside a little for the prefigured stranger to come forward and she felt herself face to face with the real man, there was a little shock which flushed her cheeks and vexatiously deepened with her consciousness of it. The shock came from the reversal of her expectations: Grandcourt could hardly have been more unlike all her imaginary portraits of him. He was slightly taller than herself, and their eyes seemed to be on a level; there was not the faintest smile on his face as he looked at her, not a trace of self-consciousness or anxiety in his bearing; when he raised his hat he showed an extensive baldness surrounded with a mere fringe of reddish-blond hair, but he also showed a perfect hand; the line of feature from brow to chin undisguised by beard was decidedly handsome, with only moderate departures from the perpendicular, and the slight whisker too was perpendicular. It was not possible for a human aspect to be freer from grimace or solicitous wrigglings; also it was perhaps not possible for a breathing man wide awake to look less animated. The correct Englishman, drawing himself up from his bow into rigidity, assenting severely, and seeming to be in a state of internal drill, suggests a suppressed vivacity, and may be suspected of letting go with some violence when he is released from parade; but Grandcourt's bearing had no rigidity, it inclined rather to the flaccid. His complexion had a faded fairness resembling that of an actress when bare of the artificial white and red; his long narrow grey eyes expressed nothing but indifference. Attempts at description are stupid: who can all at once describe a human being? even when he is presented to us we only begin that knowledge of his appearance which must be completed by innumerable impressions under differing circumstances. We recognise the alphabet; we are not sure of the language. I am only mentioning the points that Gwendolen saw by the light of a prepared contrast in the first minutes of her meeting with Grandcourt: they were summed up in the words, 'He is not ridiculous.' But forthwith Lord Brackenshaw was gone, and what is called conversation had begun, the first and constant element in it being that Grandcourt looked at Gwendolen persistently with a slightly exploring gaze, but without change of expression, while she only occasionally looked at him with a flash of observation a little softened by coquetry. Also, after her answers there was a longer or shorter pause before he spoke again.

'I used to think archery was a great bore,' Grandcourt began. He spoke with a fine accent, but with a certain broken drawl, as of a distinguished personage with a distinguished cold on his chest.

'Are you converted to-day?' said Gwendolen.

(Pause, during which she imagined various degrees and modes of opinion about herself that might be entertained by Grandcourt.)

'Yes, since I saw you shooting. In things of this sort one generally sees people missing and simpering.'

'I suppose you are a first-rate shot with a rifle.'

(Pause, during which Gwendolen, having taken a rapid observation of Grandcourt, made a brief graphic description of him to an indefinite hearer.)

'I have left off shooting.'

'Oh, then, you are a formidable person. People who have done things once and left them off make one feel very contemptible, as if one were using cast-off fashions. I hope you have not left off all follies, because I practise a great many.'

(Pause, during which Gwendolen made several interpretations of her own speech.)

'What do you call follies?'

'Well, in general, I think whatever is agreeable is called a folly. But you have not left off hunting, I hear.'

(Pause, wherein Gwendolen recalled what she had heard about Grandcourt's position, and decided that he was the most aristocratic-looking man she had ever seen.)

'One must do something.'

'And do you care about the turf? – or is that among the things you have left off?'

(Pause, during which Gwendolen thought that a man of extremely calm, cold manners might be less disagreeable as a husband than other men, and not likely to interfere with his wife's preferences.)

‘I run a horse now and then; but I don’t go in for the thing as some men do. Are you fond of horses?’

‘Yes, indeed: I never like my life so well as when I am on horseback, having a great gallop. I think of nothing. I only feel myself strong and happy.’

(Pause, wherein Gwendolen wondered whether Grandcourt would like what she said, but assured herself that she was not going to disguise her tastes.)

‘Do you like danger?’

‘I don’t know. When I am on horseback I never think of danger. It seems to me that if I broke my bones I should not feel it. I should go at anything that came in my way.’

(Pause, during which Gwendolen had run through a whole hunting season with two chosen hunters to ride at will.)

‘You would perhaps like tiger-hunting or pig-sticking. I saw some of that for a season or two in the East. Everything here is poor stuff after that.’

‘*You* are fond of danger, then?’

(Pause, wherein Gwendolen speculated on the probability that the men of coldest manners were the most adventurous, and felt the strength of her own insight, supposing the question had to be decided.)

‘One must have something or other. But one gets used to it.’

‘I begin to think I am very fortunate, because everything is new to me: it is only that I can’t get enough of it. I am not used to anything except being dull, which I should like to leave off as you have left off shooting.’

(Pause, during which it occurred to Gwendolen that a man of cold and distinguished manners might possibly be a dull companion; but on the other hand she thought that most persons were dull, that she had not observed husbands to be companions – and that after all she was not going to accept Grandcourt.)

‘Why are you dull?’

‘This is a dreadful neighbourhood. There is nothing to be done in it. That is why I practised my archery.’

(Pause, during which Gwendolen reflected that the life of an unmarried woman who could not go about and had no command of anything must necessarily be dull through all the degrees of comparison as time went on.)

‘You have made yourself queen of it. I imagine you will carry the first prize.’

‘I don’t know that. I have great rivals. Did you not observe how well Miss Arrowpoint shot?’

(Pause, wherein Gwendolen was thinking that men had been known to choose some one else than the woman they most admired, and recalled several experiences of that kind in novels.)

‘Miss Arrowpoint? No – that is, yes.’

‘Shall we go now and hear what the scoring says? Every one is going to the other end now – shall we join them? I think my uncle is looking towards me. He perhaps wants me.’

Gwendolen found a relief for herself by thus changing the situation: not that the *tête-à-tête* was quite disagreeable to her; but while it lasted she apparently could not get rid of the unwonted flush in her cheeks and the sense of surprise which made her feel less mistress of herself than usual. And this Mr Grandcourt, who seemed to feel his own importance more than he did hers – a sort of unreasonableness few of us can tolerate – must not take for granted that he was of great moment to her, or that because others speculated on him as a desirable match she held herself altogether at his beck. How Grandcourt had filled up the pauses will be more evident hereafter.

‘You have just missed the gold arrow, Gwendolen,’ said Mr Gascoigne. ‘Miss Juliet Fenn scores eight above you.’

‘I am very glad to hear it. I should have felt that I was making myself too disagreeable – taking the best of everything,’ said Gwendolen, quite easily.

It was impossible to be jealous of Juliet Fenn, a girl as middling as mid-day market in everything but her archery and her plainness, in which last she was noticeably like her father: underhung and with receding brow resembling that of the more intelligent fishes. (Surely, considering the importance which is given to such an accident in female offspring, marriageable men, or what the new English calls ‘intending bridegrooms,’ should look at themselves dispassionately in the glass, since their natural selection of a mate prettier than themselves is not certain to bar the effect of their own ugliness.)

There was now a lively movement in the mingling groups, which carried the talk along with it. Every one spoke to every one else by turns, and Gwendolen, who chose to see what was going on around her now, observed that Grandcourt was having Klesmer presented to him by some one unknown to her – a middle-aged man with dark full face and fat hands, who seemed to be on the easiest terms with both, and presently led the way in joining the Arrowpoints, whose acquaintance had already been made by both him and Grandcourt. Who this stranger was she did not care much to know; but she wished to observe what was Grandcourt’s manner towards others than herself. Precisely the same: except that he did not look much at Miss Arrowpoint, but rather at Klesmer, who was speaking with animation – now stretching out his long fingers horizontally, now pointing downwards with his fore-finger, now folding his arms and tossing his mane, while he addressed

himself first to one and then the other, including Grandcourt, who listened with an impassive face and narrow eyes, his left fore-finger in his waistcoat-pocket, and his right slightly touching his thin whisker.

'I wonder which style Miss Arrowpoint admires most,' was a thought that glanced through Gwendolen's mind while her eyes and lips gathered rather a mocking expression. But she would not indulge her sense of amusement by watching as if she were curious, and she gave all her animation to those immediately around her, determined not to care whether Mr Grandcourt came near her again or not.

He did come, however, and at a moment when he could propose to conduct Mrs Davilow to her carriage. 'Shall we meet again in the ball-room?' she said, as he raised his hat at parting. The 'yes' in reply had the usual slight drawl and perfect gravity.

'You were wrong for once, Gwendolen,' said Mrs Davilow, during their few minutes' drive to the castle.

'In what, mamma?'

'About Mr Grandcourt's appearance and manners. You can't find anything ridiculous in him.'

'I suppose I could if I tried, but I don't want to do it,' said Gwendolen, rather pettishly; and her mamma was afraid to say more.

It was the rule on these occasions for the ladies and gentlemen to dine apart, so that the dinner might make a time of comparative ease and rest for both. Indeed the gentlemen had a set of archery stories about the epicurism of the ladies, who had somehow been reported to show a revolting masculine judgment in venison, even asking for the fat – a proof of the frightful rate at which corruption might go on in women, but for severe social restraint. And every year the amiable Lord Brackenshaw, who was something of a *gourmet*, mentioned Byron's opinion that a woman should never be seen eating, – introducing it with a confidential – 'The fact is' – as if he were for the first time admitting his concurrence in that sentiment of the refined poet.

In the ladies' dining-room it was evident that Gwendolen was not a general favourite with her own sex; there were no beginnings of intimacy between her and other girls, and in conversation they rather noticed what she said than spoke to her in free exchange. Perhaps it was that she was not much interested in them, and when left alone in their company had a sense of empty benches. Mrs Vulcany once remarked that Miss Harleth was too fond of the gentlemen; but we know that she was not in the least fond of them – she was only fond of their homage – and women did not give her homage. The exception to this willing aloofness from her was Miss Arrowpoint, who often managed unostentatiously to be by her side, and talked to her with quiet friendliness.

'She knows, as I do, that our friends are ready to quarrel over a husband for us,' thought Gwendolen, 'and she is determined not to enter into the quarrel.'

'I think Miss Arrowpoint has the best manners I ever saw,' said Mrs Davilow, when she and Gwendolen were in a dressing-room with Mrs Gascoigne and Anna, but at a distance where they could have their talk apart.

'I wish I were like her,' said Gwendolen.

'Why? Are you getting discontented with yourself, Gwen?'

'No; but I am discontented with things. She seems contented.'

'I am sure you ought to be satisfied to-day. You must have enjoyed the shooting. I saw you did.'

'Oh, that is over now, and I don't know what will come next,' said Gwendolen, stretching herself with a sort of moan and throwing up her arms. They were bare now: it was the fashion to dance in the archery dress, throwing off the jacket; and the simplicity of her white cashmere with its border of pale green set off her form to the utmost. A thin line of gold round her neck, and the gold star on her breast, were her only ornaments. Her smooth soft hair piled up into a grand crown made a clear line about her brow. Sir Joshua would have been glad to take her portrait; and he would have had an easier task than the historian at least in this, that he would not have had to represent the truth of change – only to give stability to one beautiful moment.

'The dancing will come next,' said Mrs Davilow. 'You are sure to enjoy that.'

'I shall only dance in the quadrille. I told Mr Clintock so. I shall not waltz or polk with any one.'

'Why in the world do you say that all on a sudden?'

'I can't bear having ugly people so near me.'

'Whom do you mean by ugly people?'

'Oh, plenty.'

'Mr Clintock, for example, is not ugly.' Mrs Davilow dared not mention Grandcourt.

'Well, I hate woollen cloth touching me.'

'Fancy!' said Mrs Davilow to her sister who now came up from the other end of the room. 'Gwendolen says she will not waltz or polk.'

'She is rather given to whims, I think,' said Mrs Gascoigne, gravely. 'It would be more becoming in her to behave as other young ladies do on such an occasion as this; especially when she has had the advantage of first-rate dancing lessons.'

'Why should I waltz if I don't like it, aunt? It is not in the Catechism.'

‘My *dear*!’ said Mrs Gascoigne, in a tone of severe check, and Anna looked frightened at Gwendolen’s daring. But they all passed on without saying more.

Apparently something had changed Gwendolen’s mood since the hour of exulting enjoyment in the archery-ground. But she did not look the worse under the chandeliers in the ball-room, where the soft splendour of the scene and the pleasant odours from the conservatory could not but be soothing to the temper, when accompanied with the consciousness of being pre-eminently sought for. Hardly a dancing man but was anxious to have her for a partner, and each whom she accepted was in a state of melancholy remonstrance that she would not waltz or polk.

‘Are you under a vow, Miss Harleth?’ – ‘Why are you so cruel to us all?’ – ‘You waltzed with me in February.’ – ‘And you who waltz so perfectly!’ were exclamations not without piquancy for her. The ladies who waltzed, naturally thought that Miss Harleth only wanted to make herself particular; but her uncle when he overheard her refusal supported her by saying –

‘Gwendolen has usually good reasons.’ He thought she was certainly more distinguished in not waltzing, and he wished her to be distinguished. The archery ball was intended to be kept at the subdued pitch that suited all dignities clerical and secular: it was not an escapement for youthful high spirits, and he himself was of opinion that the fashionable dances were too much of a romp.

Among the remonstrant dancing men, however, Mr Grandcourt was not numbered. After standing up for a quadrille with Miss Arrowpoint, it seemed that he meant to ask for no other partner. Gwendolen observed him frequently with the Arrowpoints, but he never took an opportunity of approaching her. Mr Gascoigne was sometimes speaking to him; but Mr Gascoigne was everywhere. It was in her mind now that she would probably after all not have the least trouble about him: perhaps he had looked at her without any particular admiration, and was too much used to everything in the world to think of her as more than one of the girls who were invited in that part of the country. Of course! It was ridiculous of elders to entertain notions about what a man would do, without having seen him even through a telescope. Probably he meant to marry Miss Arrowpoint. Whatever might come, she, Gwendolen, was not going to be disappointed: the affair was a joke whichever way it turned, for she had never committed herself even by a silent confidence in anything Mr Grandcourt would do. Still, she noticed that he did sometimes quietly and gradually change his position according to hers, so that he could see her whenever she was dancing, and if he did not admire her – so much the worse for him.

This movement for the sake of being in sight of her was more direct than usual rather late in the evening, when Gwendolen had accepted Klesmer as a partner; and that wide-glancing personage, who saw everything and nothing by turns, said to her when they were walking, ‘Mr Grandcourt is a man of taste. He likes to see you dancing.’

‘Perhaps he likes to look at what is against his taste,’ said Gwendolen, with a light laugh: she was quite courageous with Klesmer now. ‘He may be so tired of admiring that he likes disgust for a variety.’

‘Those words are not suitable to your lips,’ said Klesmer, quickly, with one of his grand frowns, while he shook his hand as if to banish the discordant sounds.

‘Are you as critical of words as of music?’

‘Certainly I am. I should require your words to be what your face and form are – always among the meanings of a noble music.’

‘That is a compliment as well as a correction. I am obliged for both. But do you know I am bold enough to wish to correct *you*, and require you to understand a joke?’

‘One may understand jokes without liking them,’ said the terrible Klesmer. ‘I have had opera books sent me full of jokes; it was just because I understood them that I did not like them. The comic people are ready to challenge a man because he looks grave. “You don’t see the witticism, sir?” “No, sir, but I see what you meant.” Then I am what we call ticketed as a fellow without *esprit*. But, in fact,’ said Klesmer, suddenly dropping from his quick narrative to a reflective tone, with an impressive frown, ‘I am very sensible to wit and humour.’

‘I am glad you tell me that,’ said Gwendolen, not without some wickedness of intention. But Klesmer’s thoughts had flown off on the wings of his own statement, as their habit was, and she had the wickedness all to herself. ‘Pray, who is that standing near the cardroom door?’ she went on, seeing there the same stranger with whom Klesmer had been in animated talk on the archery-ground. ‘He is a friend of yours, I think.’

‘No, no; an amateur I have seen in town: Lush, a Mr Lush – too fond of Meyerbeer and Scribe – too fond of the mechanical-dramatic.’

‘Thanks. I wanted to know whether you thought his face and form required that his words should be among the meanings of noble music?’ Klesmer was conquered, and flashed at her a delightful smile which made them quite friendly until she begged to be deposited by the side of her mamma.

Three minutes afterwards her preparations for Grandcourt’s indifference were all cancelled. Turning her

head after some remark to her mother, she found that he had made his way up to her.

'May I ask if you are tired of dancing, Miss Harleth?' he began, looking down with his former unperturbed expression.

'Not in the least.'

'Will you do me the honour – the next – or another quadrille?'

'I should have been very happy,' said Gwendolen, looking at her card, 'but I am engaged for the next to Mr Clintock – and indeed I perceive that I am doomed for every quadrille: I have not one to dispose of.' She was not sorry to punish Mr Grandcourt's tardiness, yet at the same time she would have liked to dance with him. She gave him a charming smile as she looked up to deliver her answer, and he stood still looking down at her with no smile at all.

'I am unfortunate in being too late,' he said, after a moment's pause.

'It seemed to me that you did not care for dancing,' said Gwendolen. 'I thought it might be one of the things you had left off.'

'Yes, but I have not begun to dance with you,' said Grandcourt. Always there was the same pause before he took up his cue. 'You make dancing a new thing, as you make archery.'

'Is novelty always agreeable?'

'No, no – not always.'

'Then I don't know whether to feel flattered or not. When you had once danced with me there would be no more novelty in it.'

'On the contrary; there would probably be much more.'

'That is deep. I don't understand.'

'Is it difficult to make Miss Harleth understand her power?' Here Grandcourt had turned to Mrs Davilow, who, smiling gently at her daughter, said –

'I think she does not generally strike people as slow to understand.'

'Mamma,' said Gwendolen, in a deprecating tone, 'I am adorably stupid, and want everything explained to me – when the meaning is pleasant.'

'If you are stupid, I admit that stupidity is adorable,' returned Grandcourt, after the usual pause, and without change of tone. But clearly he knew what to say.

'I begin to think that my cavalier has forgotten me,' Gwendolen observed after a little while. 'I see the quadrille is being formed.'

'He deserves to be renounced,' said Grandcourt.

'I think he is very pardonable,' said Gwendolen.

'There must have been some misunderstanding,' said Mrs Davilow. 'Mr Clintock was too anxious about the engagement to have forgotten it.'

But now Lady Brackenshaw came up and said, 'Miss Harleth, Mr Clintock has charged me to express to you his deep regret that he was obliged to leave without having the pleasure of dancing with you again. An express came from his father the archdeacon: something important: he was obliged to go. He was *au désespoir*.'

'Oh, he was very good to remember the engagement under the circumstances,' said Gwendolen. 'I am sorry he was called away.' It was easy to be politely sorrowful on so felicitous an occasion.

'Then I can profit by Mr Clintock's misfortune?' said Grandcourt. 'May I hope that you will let me take his place?'

'I shall be very happy to dance the next quadrille with you.'

The appropriateness of the event seemed an augury, and as Gwendolen stood up for the quadrille with Grandcourt, there was a revival in her of the exultation – the sense of carrying everything before her, which she had felt earlier in the day. No man could have walked through the quadrille with more irreproachable ease than Grandcourt; and the absence of all eagerness in his attention to her suited his partner's taste. She was now convinced that he meant to distinguish her, to mark his admiration of her in a noticeable way; and it began to appear probable that she would have it in her power to reject him, whence there was a pleasure in reckoning up the advantages which would make her rejection splendid, and in giving Mr Grandcourt his utmost value. It was also agreeable to divine that his exclusive selection of her to dance with, from among all the unmarried ladies present, would attract observation; though she studiously avoided seeing this, and at the end of the quadrille walked away on Grandcourt's arm as if she had been one of the shortest sighted instead of the longest and widest sighted of mortals. They encountered Miss Arrowpoint, who was standing with Lady Brackenshaw and a group of gentlemen. The heiress looked at Gwendolen invitingly and said, 'I hope you will vote with us, Miss Harleth, and Mr Grandcourt too, though he is not an archer.' Gwendolen and Grandcourt paused to join the group, and found that the voting turned on the project of a picnic archery meeting to be held in Cardell Chase, where the evening entertainment would be more poetic than a ball under chandeliers – a feast of sunset lights along the glades and through the branches and over the solemn treetops.

Gwendolen thought the scheme delightful – equal to playing Robin Hood and Maid Marian; and Mr Grandcourt, when appealed to a second time, said it was a thing to be done; whereupon Mr Lush, who stood behind Lady Brackenshaw's elbow, drew Gwendolen's notice by saying, with a familiar look and tone to Grandcourt, 'Diplow would be a good place for the meeting, and more convenient: there's a fine bit between the oaks towards the north gate.'

Impossible to look more unconscious of being addressed than Grandcourt; but Gwendolen took a new survey of the speaker, deciding, first, that he must be on terms of intimacy with the tenant of Diplow, and, secondly, that she would never, if she could help it, let him come within a yard of her. She was subject to physical antipathies, and Mr Lush's prominent eyes, fat though not clumsy figure, and strong black grey-besprinkled hair of frizzy thickness, which, with the rest of his prosperous person, was enviable to many, created one of the strongest of her antipathies. To be safe from his looking at her, she murmured to Grandcourt, 'I should like to continue walking.'

He obeyed immediately; but when they were thus away from any audience, he spoke no word for several minutes, and she, out of a half-amused, half-serious inclination for experiment, would not speak first. They turned into the large conservatory, beautifully lit up with Chinese lamps. The other couples there were at a distance which would not have interfered with any dialogue, but still they walked in silence until they had reached the farther end where there was a flush of pink light, and the second wide opening into the ball-room. Grandcourt, when they had half turned round, paused and said languidly –

'Do you like this kind of thing?'

If the situation had been described to Gwendolen half an hour before, she would have laughed heartily at it, and could only have imagined herself returning a playful, satirical answer. But for some mysterious reason – it was a mystery of which she had a faint wondering consciousness – she dared not be satirical: she had begun to feel a wand over her that made her afraid of offending Grandcourt.

'Yes,' she said, quietly, without considering what 'kind of thing' was meant – whether the flowers, the scents, the ball in general, or this episode of walking with Mr Grandcourt in particular. And they returned along the conservatory without farther interpretation. She then proposed to go and sit down in her old place, and they walked among scattered couples preparing for the waltz to the spot where Mrs Davilow had been seated all the evening. As they approached it her seat was vacant, but she was coming towards it again, and, to Gwendolen's shuddering annoyance, with Mr Lush at her elbow. There was no avoiding the confrontation: her mamma came close to her before they had reached the seats, and, after a quiet greeting smile, said innocently, 'Gwendolen, dear, let me present Mr Lush to you.' Having just made the acquaintance of this personage, as an intimate and constant companion of Mr Grandcourt's, Mrs Davilow imagined it altogether desirable that her daughter also should make the acquaintance.

It was hardly a bow that Gwendolen gave – rather, it was the slightest forward sweep of the head away from the physiognomy that inclined itself towards her, and she immediately moved towards her seat, saying, 'I want to put on my burnous.' No sooner had she reached it, than Mr Lush was there, and had the burnous in his hand: to annoy this supercilious young lady, he would incur the offence of forestalling Grandcourt; and, holding up the garment close to Gwendolen, he said, 'Pray, permit me?' But she, wheeling away from him as if he had been a muddy hound, glided on to the ottoman, saying, 'No, thank you.'

A man who forgave this would have much Christian feeling, supposing he had intended to be agreeable to the young lady; but before he seized the burnous Mr Lush had ceased to have that intention. Grandcourt quietly took the drapery from him, and Mr Lush, with a slight bow, moved away.

'You had perhaps better put it on,' said Mr Grandcourt, looking down on her without change of expression.

'Thanks; perhaps it would be wise,' said Gwendolen, rising, and submitting very gracefully to take the burnous on her shoulders.

After that, Mr Grandcourt exchanged a few polite speeches with Mrs Davilow, and, in taking leave, asked permission to call at Offendene the next day. He was evidently not offended by the insult directed towards his friend. Certainly, Gwendolen's refusal of the burnous from Mr Lush was open to the interpretation that she wished to receive it from Mr Grandcourt. But she, poor child, had had no design in this action, and was simply following her antipathy and inclination, confiding in them as she did in the more reflective judgments into which they entered as sap into leafage. Gwendolen had no sense that these men were dark enigmas to her, or that she needed any help in drawing conclusions about them – Mr Grandcourt at least. The chief question was, how far his character and ways might answer her wishes; and unless she were satisfied about that, she had said to herself that she would not accept his offer.

Could there be a slenderer, more insignificant thread in human history than this consciousness of a girl, busy with her small inferences of the way in which she could make her life pleasant? – in a time, too, when ideas were with fresh vigour making armies of themselves, and the universal kinship was declaring itself fiercely:

when women on the other side of the world would not mourn for the husbands and sons who died bravely in a common cause, and men stinted of bread on our side of the world heard of that willing loss and were patient: a time when the soul of man was waking to pulses which had for centuries been beating in him unfelt, until their full sum made a new life of terror or of joy.

What in the midst of that mighty drama are girls and their blind visions? They are the Yea or Nay of that good for which men are enduring and fighting. In these delicate vessels is borne onward through the ages the treasure of human affections.

Chapter Twelve

O gentlemen, the time of life is short;
To spend that shortness basely were too long,
If life did ride upon a dial's point,
Still ending at the arrival of an hour.

– SHAKESPEARE: *Henry IV*

On the second day after the Archery Meeting, Mr Henleigh Mallinger Grandcourt was at his breakfast-table with Mr Lush. Everything around them was agreeable: the summer air through the open windows, at which the dogs could walk in from the old green turf on the lawn; the soft, purplish colouring of the park beyond, stretching towards a mass of bordering wood; the still life in the room, which seemed the stiller for its sober antiquated elegance, as if it kept a conscious, well-bred silence, unlike the restlessness of vulgar furniture.

Whether the gentlemen were agreeable to each other was less evident. Mr Grandcourt had drawn his chair aside so as to face the lawn, and, with his left leg over another chair, and his right elbow on the table, was smoking a large cigar, while his companion was still eating. The dogs – half-a-dozen of various kinds were moving lazily in and out, or taking attitudes of brief attention – gave a vacillating preference first to one gentleman, then to the other; being dogs in such good circumstances that they could play at hunger, and liked to be served with delicacies which they declined to put into their mouths; all except Fetch, the beautiful liver-coloured water-spaniel, which sat with its fore-paws firmly planted and its expressive brown face turned upward, watching Grandcourt with unshaken constancy. He held in his lap a tiny Maltese dog with a tiny silver collar and bell, and when he had a hand unused by cigar or coffee-cup, it rested on this small parcel of animal warmth. I fear that Fetch was jealous, and wounded that her master gave her no word or look; at last it seemed that she could bear this neglect no longer, and she gently put her large silky paw on her master's leg. Grandcourt looked at her with unchanged face for half a minute, and then took the trouble to lay down his cigar while he lifted the unimpassioned Fluff close to his chin and gave it caressing pats, all the while gravely watching Fetch, who, poor thing, whimpered interruptedly, as if trying to repress that sign of discontent, and at last rested her head beside the appealing paw, looking up with piteous beseeching. So, at least, a lover of dogs must have interpreted Fetch, and Grandcourt kept so many dogs that he was reputed to love them; at any rate, his impulse to act just in this way started from such an interpretation. But when the amusing anguish burst forth in a howling bark, Grandcourt pushed Fetch down without speaking, and, depositing Fluff carelessly on the table (where his black nose predominated over a salt-cellar), began to look to his cigar, and found, with some annoyance against Fetch as the cause, that the brute of a cigar required relighting. Fetch, having begun to wail, found, like others of her sex, that it was not easy to leave off; indeed, the second howl was a louder one, and the third was like unto it.

'Turn out that brute, will you?' said Grandcourt to Lush, without raising his voice or looking at him – as if he counted on attention to the smallest sign.

And Lush immediately rose, lifted Fetch, though she was rather heavy and he was not fond of stooping, and carried her out, disposing of her in some way that took him a couple of minutes before he returned. He then lit a cigar, placed himself at an angle where he could see Grandcourt's face without turning, and presently said –

'Shall you ride or drive to Quetcham to-day?'

'I am not going to Quetcham.'

'You did not go yesterday.'

Grandcourt smoked in silence for half a minute, and then said –

'I suppose you sent my card and inquiries.'

'I went myself at four, and said you were sure to be there shortly. They would suppose some accident prevented you from fulfilling the intention. Especially if you go to-day.'

Silence for a couple of minutes. Then Grandcourt said, 'What men are invited here with their wives?'

Lush drew out a note-book. 'The Captain and Mrs Torrington come next week. Then there are Mr Hollis and Lady Flora, and the Cushats, and the Gogoffs.'

‘Rather a ragged lot,’ remarked Grandcourt after a while. ‘Why did you ask the Gogoffs? When you write invitations in my name, be good enough to give me a list, instead of bringing down a giantess on me without my knowledge. She spoils the look of the room.’

‘You invited the Gogoffs yourself, when you met them in Paris.’

‘What has my meeting them in Paris to do with it? I told you to give me a list.’

Grandcourt, like many others, had two remarkably different voices. Hitherto we have heard him speaking in a superficial interrupted drawl suggestive chiefly of languor and *ennui*. But this last brief speech was uttered in subdued, inward, yet distinct tones, which Lush had long been used to recognise as the expression of a peremptory will.

‘Are there any other couples you would like to invite?’

‘Yes; think of some decent people, with a daughter or two. And one of your damned musicians. But not a comic fellow.’

‘I wonder if Klesmer would consent to come to us when he leaves Quetcham. Nothing but first-rate music will go down with Miss Arrowpoint.’

Lush spoke carelessly, but he was really seizing an opportunity and fixing an observant look on Grandcourt, who now for the first time turned his eyes towards his companion, but slowly, and without speaking until he had given two long luxurious puffs, when he said, perhaps in a lower tone than ever, but with a perceptible edge of contempt –

‘What in the name of nonsense have I to do with Miss Arrowpoint and her music?’

‘Well, something,’ said Lush, jocosely. ‘You need not give yourself much trouble, perhaps. But some forms must be gone through before a man can marry a million.’

‘Very likely. But I am not going to marry a million.’

‘That’s a pity – to fling away an opportunity of this sort, and knock down your own plans.’

‘*Your* plans, I suppose you mean.’

‘You have some debts, you know, and things may turn out inconveniently after all. The heirship is not *absolutely* certain.’

Grandcourt did not answer, and Lush went on.

‘It really is a fine opportunity. The father and mother ask for nothing better, I can see, and the daughter’s looks and manners require no allowances, any more than if she hadn’t a sixpence. She is not beautiful; but equal to carrying any rank. And she is not likely to refuse such prospects as you can offer her.’

‘Perhaps not.’

‘The father and mother would let you do anything you liked with them.’

‘But I should not like to do anything with them.’

Here it was Lush who made a little pause before speaking again, and then he said in a deep voice of remonstrance, ‘Good God, Grandcourt! after your experience, will you let a whim interfere with your comfortable settlement in life?’

‘Spare your oratory. I know what I am going to do.’

‘What?’ Lush put down his cigar and thrust his hands into his side pockets, as if he had to face something exasperating, but meant to keep his temper.

‘I am going to marry the other girl.’

‘Have you fallen in love?’ This question carried a strong sneer.

‘I am going to marry her.’

‘You have made her an offer already, then?’

‘No.’

‘She is a young lady with a will of her own, I fancy. Extremely well fitted to make a rumpus. She would know what she liked.’

‘She doesn’t like you,’ said Grandcourt, with the ghost of a smile.

‘Perfectly true,’ said Lush, adding again in a markedly sneering tone, ‘However, if you and she are devoted to each other, that will be enough.’

Grandcourt took no notice of this speech, but sipped his coffee, rose, and strolled out on the lawn, all the dogs following him.

Lush glanced after him a moment, then resumed his cigar and lit it, but smoked slowly, consulting his beard with inspecting eyes and fingers, till he finally stroked it with an air of having arrived at some conclusion, and said, in a subdued voice –

‘Check, old boy!’

Lush, being a man of some ability, had not known Grandcourt for fifteen years without learning what sort of measures were useless with him, though what sort might be useful remained often dubious. In the beginning of his career he held a fellowship, and was near taking orders for the sake of a college living, but not being

fond of that prospect accepted instead the office of travelling companion to a marquess, and afterwards to young Grandcourt, who had lost his father early, and who found Lush so convenient that he had allowed him to become prime minister in all his more personal affairs. The habit of fifteen years had made Grandcourt more and more in need of Lush's handiness, and Lush more and more in need of the lazy luxury to which his transactions on behalf of Grandcourt made no interruption worth reckoning. I cannot say that the same lengthened habit had intensified Grandcourt's want of respect for his companion since that want had been absolute from the beginning, but it had confirmed his sense that he might kick Lush if he chose – only he never did choose to kick any animal, because the act of kicking is a compromising attitude, and a gentleman's dogs should be kicked for him. He only said things which might have exposed himself to be kicked if his confidant had been a man of independent spirit. But what son of a vicar who has stinted his wife and daughters of calico in order to send his male offspring to Oxford, can keep an independent spirit when he is bent on dining with high discrimination, riding good horses, living generally in the most luxuriant honey-blossomed clover – and all without working? Mr Lush had passed for a scholar once, and had still a sense of scholarship when he was not trying to remember much of it; but the bachelors' and other arts which soften manners are a time-honoured preparation for sinecures; and Lush's present comfortable provision was as good as a sinecure in not requiring more than the odour of departed learning. He was not unconscious of being held kickable, but he preferred counting that estimate among the peculiarities of Grandcourt's character, which made one of his incalculable moods or judgments as good as another. Since in his own opinion he had never done a bad action, it did not seem necessary to consider whether he should be likely to commit one if his love of ease required it. Lush's love of ease was well satisfied at present, and if his puddings were rolled towards him in the dust, he took the inside bits and found them relishing.

This morning, for example, though he had encountered more annoyance than usual, he went to his private sitting-room and played a good hour on the violoncello.

Chapter Thirteen

Philistia, be thou glad of me!

Grandcourt having made up his mind to marry Miss Harleth showed a power of adapting means to ends. During the next fortnight there was hardly a day on which by some arrangement or other he did not see her, or prove by emphatic attentions that she occupied his thoughts. His cousin Mrs Torrington was now doing the honours of his house, so that Mrs Davilow and Gwendolen could be invited to a large party at Diplow in which there were many witnesses how the host distinguished the dowerless beauty, and showed no solicitude about the heiress. The world – I mean Mr Gascoigne and all the families worth speaking of within visiting distance of Pennicote – felt an assurance on the subject which in the Rector's mind converted itself into a resolution to do his duty by his niece and see that the settlements were adequate. Indeed the wonder to him and Mrs Davilow was that the offer for which so many suitable occasions presented themselves had not been already made; and in this wonder Grandcourt himself was not without a share. When he had told his resolution to Lush he had thought that the affair would be concluded more quickly, and to his own surprise he had repeatedly promised himself in a morning that he would to-day give Gwendolen the opportunity of accepting him, and had found in the evening that the necessary formality was still unaccomplished. This remarkable fact served to heighten his determination on another day. He had never admitted to himself that Gwendolen might refuse him, but – heaven help us all! – we are often unable to act on our certainties; our objection to a contrary issue (were it possible) is so strong that it rises like a spectral illusion between us and our certainty: we are rationally sure that the blind-worm cannot bite us mortally, but it would be so intolerable to be bitten, and the creature has a biting look – we decline to handle it.

He had asked leave to have a beautiful horse of his brought for Gwendolen to ride. Mrs Davilow was to accompany her in the carriage, and they were to go to Diplow to lunch, Grandcourt conducting them. It was a fine mid-harvest time, not too warm for a noonday ride of five miles to be delightful: the poppies glowed on the borders of the fields, there was enough breeze to move gently like a social spirit among the ears of uncut corn, and to wing the shadow of a cloud across the soft grey downs; here the sheaves were standing, there the horses were straining their muscles under the last load from a wide space of stubble, but everywhere the green pastures made a broader setting for the corn-fields, and the cattle took their rest under wide branches. The road lay through a bit of country where the dairy-farms looked much as they did in the days of our forefathers – where peace and permanence seemed to find a home away from the busy change that sent the railway train flying in the distance.

But the spirit of peace and permanence did not penetrate poor Mrs Davilow's mind so as to overcome her habit of uneasy foreboding. Gwendolen and Grandcourt cantering in front of her, and then slackening their pace to a conversational walk till the carriage came up with them again, made a gratifying sight; but it served chiefly to keep up the conflict of hopes and fears about her daughter's lot. Here was an irresistible opportunity for a lover to speak and put an end to all uncertainties, and Mrs Davilow could only hope with trembling that Gwendolen's decision would be favourable. Certainly if Rex's love had been repugnant to her, Mr Grandcourt had the advantage of being in complete contrast with Rex; and that he had produced some quite novel impression on her seemed evident in her marked abstinence from satirical observations, nay, her total silence about his characteristics, a silence which Mrs Davilow did not dare to break. 'Is he a man she would be happy with?' – was a question that inevitably arose in the mother's mind. 'Well, perhaps as happy as she would be with any one else – or as most other women are' – was the answer with which she tried to quiet herself, for she could not imagine Gwendolen under the influence of any feeling which would make her satisfied in what we traditionally call 'mean circumstances.'

Grandcourt's own thought was looking in the same direction: he wanted to have done with the uncertainty that belonged to his not having spoken. As to any further uncertainty – well, it was something without any reasonable basis, some quality in the air which acted as an irritant to his wishes.

Gwendolen enjoyed the riding, but her pleasure did not break forth in girlish unpremeditated chat and laughter as it did on that morning with Rex. She spoke a little, and even laughed, but with a lightness as of a far-off echo: for her too there was some peculiar quality in the air – not, she was sure, any subjugation of her

will by Mr Grandcourt, and the splendid prospects he meant to offer her; for Gwendolen desired every one, that dignified gentleman himself included, to understand that she was going to do just as she liked, and that they had better not calculate on her pleasing them. If she chose to take this husband, she would have him know that she was not going to renounce her freedom, or according to her favourite formula, 'not going to do as other women did.'

Grandcourt's speeches this morning were, as usual, all of that brief sort which never fails to make a conversational figure when the speaker is held important in his circle. Stopping so soon, they give signs of a suppressed and formidable ability to say more, and have also the meritorious quality of allowing lengthiness to others.

'How do you like Criterion's paces?' he said, after they had entered the park and were slackening from a canter to a walk.

'He is delightful to ride. I should like to have a leap with him, if it would not frighten mamma. There was a good wide channel we passed five minutes ago. I should like to have a gallop back and take it.'

'Pray do. We can take it together.'

'No, thanks. Mamma is so timid – if she saw me it might make her ill.'

'Let me go and explain. Criterion would take it without fail.'

'No – indeed – you are very kind – but it would alarm her too much. I dare take any leap when she is not by; but I do it and don't tell her about it.'

'We can let the carriage pass and then set off.'

'No, no, pray don't think of it any more; I spoke quite randomly,' said Gwendolen; she began to feel a new objection to carrying out her own proposition.

'But Mrs Davilow knows I shall take care of you.'

'Yes, but she would think of you as having to take care of my broken neck.'

There was a considerable pause before Grandcourt said, looking towards her, 'I should like to have the right always to take care of you.'

Gwendolen did not turn her eyes on him: it seemed to her a long while that she was first blushing, and then turning pale, but to Grandcourt's rate of judgment she answered soon enough, with the lightest flute-tone and a careless movement of the head, 'Oh, I am not sure that I want to be taken care of: if I chose to risk breaking my neck, I should like to be at liberty to do it.'

She checked her horse as she spoke, and turned in her saddle, looking towards the advancing carriage. Her eyes swept across Grandcourt as she made this movement, but there was no language in them to correct the carelessness of her reply. At that very moment she was aware that she was risking something – not her neck, but the possibility of finally checking Grandcourt's advances, and she did not feel contented with the possibility.

'Damn her!' thought Grandcourt, as he too checked his horse. He was not a wordy thinker, and this explosive phrase stood for mixed impressions which eloquent interpreters might have expanded into some sentences full of an irritated sense that he was being mystified, and a determination that this girl should not make a fool of him. Did she want him to throw himself at her feet and declare that he was dying for her? It was not by that gate that she would enter on the privileges he could give her. Or did she expect him to write his proposals? Equally a delusion. He would not make his offer in any way that could place him definitely in the position of being rejected. But as to her accepting him, she had done it already in accepting his marked attentions; and anything which happened to break them off would be understood to her disadvantage. She was merely coquetting, then?

However, the carriage came up, and no further *tête-à-tête* could well occur before their arrival at the house, where there was abundant company, to whom Gwendolen, clad in riding-dress, with her hat laid aside, clad also in the repute of being chosen by Mr Grandcourt, was naturally a centre of observation; and since the objectionable Mr Lush was not there to look at her, this stimulus of admiring attention heightened her spirits, and dispersed, for the time, the uneasy consciousness of divided impulses which threatened her with repentance of her own acts. Whether Grandcourt had been offended or not there was no judging: his manners were unchanged, but Gwendolen's acuteness had not gone deeper than to discern that his manners were no clue for her, and because these were unchanged she was not the less afraid of him.

She had not been at Diplow before except to dine; and since certain points of view from the windows and the garden were worth showing, Lady Flora Hollis proposed after luncheon, when some of the guests had dispersed, and the sun was sloping towards four o'clock, that the remaining party should make a little exploration. Here came frequent opportunities when Grandcourt might have retained Gwendolen apart, and have spoken to her unheard. But no! He indeed spoke to no one else, but what he said was nothing more eager or intimate than it had been in their first interview. He looked at her not less than usual; and some of her defiant spirit having come back, she looked full at him in return, not caring – rather preferring – that his eyes

had no expression in them.

But at last it seemed as if he entertained some contrivance. After they had nearly made the tour of the grounds, the whole party paused by the pool to be amused with Fetch's accomplishment of bringing a water-lily to the bank like Cowper's spaniel Beau, and having been disappointed in his first attempt insisted on his trying again.

Here Grandcourt, who stood with Gwendolen outside the group, turned deliberately, and fixing his eyes on a knoll planted with American shrubs, and having a winding path up it, said languidly –

'This is a bore. Shall we go up there?'

'Oh, certainly – since we are exploring,' said Gwendolen. She was rather pleased, and yet afraid.

The path was too narrow for him to offer his arm, and they walked up in silence. When they were on the bit of platform at the summit, Grandcourt said –

'There is nothing to be seen here: the thing was not worth climbing.'

How was it that Gwendolen did not laugh? She was perfectly silent, holding up the folds of her robe like a statue, and giving a harder grasp to the handle of her whip, which she had snatched up automatically with her hat when they had first set off.

'What sort of place do you like?' said Grandcourt.

'Different places are agreeable in their way. On the whole, I think, I prefer places that are open and cheerful. I am not fond of anything sombre.'

'Your place at Offendene is too sombre.'

'It is, rather.'

'You will not remain there long, I hope.'

'Oh yes, I think so. Mamma likes to be near her sister.'

Silence for a short space.

'It is not to be supposed that *you* will always live there, though Mrs Davilow may.'

'I don't know. We women can't go in search of adventures – to find out the North-West Passage or the source of the Nile, or to hunt tigers in the East. We must stay where we grow, or where the gardeners like to transplant us. We are brought up like the flowers, to look as pretty as we can, and be dull without complaining. That is my notion about the plants: they are often bored, and that is the reason why some of them have got poisonous. What do you think?' Gwendolen had run on rather nervously, lightly whipping the rhododendron bush in front of her.

'I quite agree. Most things are bores,' said Grandcourt, his mind having been pushed into an easy current, away from its intended track. But after a moment's pause he continued in his broken, refined drawl –

'But a woman can be married.'

'Some women can.'

'You certainly, unless you are obstinately cruel.'

'I am not sure that I am not both cruel and obstinate.' Here Gwendolen suddenly turned her head and looked full at Grandcourt, whose eyes she had felt to be upon her throughout their conversation. She was wondering what the effect of looking at him would be on herself rather than on him.

He stood perfectly still, half a yard or more away from her, and it flashed through her thought that a sort of lotos-eater's stupor had begun in him and was taking possession of her. Then he said –

'Are you as uncertain about yourself as you make others about you?'

'I am quite uncertain about myself, I don't know how uncertain others may be.'

'And you wish them to understand that you don't care?' said Grandcourt, with a touch of new hardness in his tone.

'I did not say that,' Gwendolen replied, hesitatingly, and turning her eyes away whipped the rhododendron bush again. She wished she were on horseback that she might set off on a canter. It was impossible to set off running down the knoll.

'You do care, then,' said Grandcourt, not more quickly, but with a softened drawl.

'Ha! my whip!' said Gwendolen, in a little scream of distress. She had let it go – what could be more natural in a slight agitation? – and – but this seemed less natural in a gold-handled whip which had been left altogether to itself – it had gone with some force over the immediate shrubs, and had lodged itself in the branches of an azalea half-way down the knoll. She could run down now, laughing prettily, and Grandcourt was obliged to follow; but she was beforehand with him in rescuing the whip, and continued on her way to the level ground, when she paused and looked at Grandcourt with an exasperating brightness in her glance and a heightened colour, as if she had carried a triumph, and these indications were still noticeable to Mrs Davilow when Gwendolen and Grandcourt joined the rest of the party.

'It is all coquetting,' thought Grandcourt; 'the next time I beckon she will come down.'

It seemed to him likely that this final beckoning might happen the very next day, when there was to be a

picnic archery meeting in Cardell Chase, according to the plan projected on the evening of the ball.

Even in Gwendolen's mind that result was one of two likelihoods that presented themselves alternately, one of two decisions towards which she was being precipitated, as if they were two sides of a boundary-line, and she did not know on which she should fall. This subjection to a possible self, a self not to be absolutely predicted about, caused her some astonishment and terror: her favourite key of life – doing as she liked – seemed to fail her, and she could not foresee what at a given moment she might like to do. The prospect of marrying Grandcourt really seemed more attractive to her than she had believed beforehand that any marriage could be: the dignities, the luxuries, the power of doing a great deal of what she liked to do, which had now come close to her, and within her choice to secure or to lose, took hold of her nature as if it had been the strong odour of what she had only imagined and longed for before. And Grandcourt himself? He seemed as little of a flaw in his fortunes as a lover and husband could possibly be. Gwendolen wished to mount the chariot and drive the plunging horses herself, with a spouse by her side who would fold his arms and give her his countenance without looking ridiculous. Certainly, with all her perspicacity, and all the reading which seemed to her mamma dangerously instructive, her judgment was consciously a little at fault before Grandcourt. He was adorably quiet and free from absurdities – he would be a husband to suit with the best appearance a woman could make. But what else was he? He had been everywhere, and seen everything. *That* was desirable, and especially gratifying as a preamble to his supreme preference for Gwendolen Harleth. He did not appear to enjoy anything much. That was not necessary: and the less he had of particular tastes or desires, the more freedom his wife was likely to have in following hers. Gwendolen conceived that after marriage she would most probably be able to manage him thoroughly.

How was it that he caused her unusual constraint now? – that she was less daring and playful in her talk with him than with any other admirer she had known? That absence of demonstrativeness which she was glad of, acted as a charm in more senses than one, and was slightly benumbing. Grandcourt after all was formidable – a handsome lizard of a hitherto unknown species, not of the lively, darting kind. But Gwendolen knew hardly any thing about lizards, and ignorance gives one a large range of probabilities. This splendid specimen was probably gentle, suitable as a boudoir pet: what may not a lizard be, if you know nothing to the contrary? Her acquaintance with Grandcourt was such that no accomplishment suddenly revealed in him would have surprised her. And he was so little suggestive of drama, that it hardly occurred to her to think with any detail how his life of thirty-six years had been passed: in general, she imagined him always cold and dignified, not likely ever to have committed himself. He had hunted the tiger – had he ever been in love or made love? The one experience and the other seemed alike remote in Gwendolen's fancy from the Mr Grandcourt who had come to Diplow in order apparently to make a chief epoch in her destiny – perhaps by introducing her to that state of marriage which she had resolved to make a state of greater freedom than her girlhood. And on the whole she wished to marry him; he suited her purpose; her prevailing, deliberate intention was, to accept him.

But was she going to fulfil her deliberate intention? She began to be afraid of herself, and to find out a certain difficulty in doing as she liked. Already her assertion of independence in evading his advances had been carried farther than was necessary, and she was thinking with some anxiety what she might do on the next occasion.

Seated according to her habit with her back to the horses on their drive homewards, she was completely under the observation of her mamma, who took the excitement and changefulness in the expression of her eyes, her unwonted absence of mind and total silence, as unmistakeable signs that something unprecedented had occurred between her and Grandcourt. Mrs Davilow's uneasiness determined her to risk some speech on the subject the Gascoignes were to dine at Offendene, and in what had occurred this morning there might be some reason for consulting the Rector; not that she expected him any more than herself to influence Gwendolen, but that her anxious mind wanted to be disburthened.

'Something has happened, dear?' she began, in a tender tone of question.

Gwendolen looked round, and seeming to be roused to the consciousness of her physical self, took off her gloves and then her hat, that the soft breeze might blow on her head. They were in a retired bit of the road, where the long afternoon shadows from the bordering trees fell across it, and no observers were within sight. Her eyes continued to meet her mother's, but she did not speak.

'Mr Grandcourt has been saying something? – Tell me, dear.' The last words were uttered beseechingly.

'What am I to tell you, mamma?' was the perverse answer.

'I am sure something has agitated you. You ought to confide in me, Gwen. You ought not to leave me in doubt and anxiety.' Mrs Davilow's eyes filled with tears.

'Mamma, dear, please don't be miserable,' said Gwendolen, with pettish remonstrance. 'It only makes me more so. I am in doubt myself.'

'About Mr Grandcourt's intentions?' said Mrs Davilow, gathering determination from her alarms.

‘No; not at all,’ said Gwendolen, with some curtness, and a pretty little toss of the head as she put on her hat again.

‘About whether you will accept him, then?’

‘Precisely.’

‘Have you given him a doubtful answer?’

‘I have given him no answer at all.’

‘He *has* spoken so that you could not misunderstand him?’

‘As far as I would let him speak.’

‘You expect him to persevere?’ Mrs Davilow put this question rather anxiously, and receiving no answer, asked another. ‘You don’t consider that you have discouraged him?’

‘I daresay not.’

‘I thought you liked him, dear,’ said Mrs Davilow, timidly.

‘So I do, mamma, as liking goes. There is less to dislike about him than about most men. He is quiet and *distingué*.’ Gwendolen so far spoke with a pouting sort of gravity; but suddenly she recovered some of her mischievousness, and her face broke into a smile as she added – ‘Indeed he has all the qualities that would make a husband tolerable – battlement, veranda, stables, &c., no grins and no glass in his eye.’

‘Do be serious with me for a moment, dear. Am I to understand that you mean to accept him?’

‘Oh pray, mamma, leave me to myself,’ said Gwendolen, with a pettish distress in her voice.

And Mrs Davilow said no more.

When they got home Gwendolen declared that she would not dine. She was tired, and would come down in the evening after she had taken some rest. The probability that her uncle would hear what had passed did not trouble her. She was convinced that whatever he might say would be on the side of her accepting Grandcourt, and she wished to accept him if she could. At this moment she would willingly have had weights hung on her own caprice.

Mr Gascoigne did hear – not Gwendolen’s answers repeated verbatim, but a softened generalised account of them. The mother conveyed as vaguely as the keen Rector’s questions would let her the impression that Gwendolen was in some uncertainty about her own mind, but inclined on the whole to acceptance. The result was that the uncle felt himself called on to interfere: he did not conceive that he should do his duty in withholding direction from his niece in a momentous crisis of this kind. Mrs Davilow ventured a hesitating opinion that perhaps it would be safer to say nothing – Gwendolen was so sensitive (she did not like to say wilful). But the Rector’s was a firm mind, grasping its first judgments tenaciously and acting on them promptly, whence counter-judgments were no more for him than shadows fleeting across the solid ground to which he adjusted himself.

This match with Grandcourt presented itself to him as a sort of public affair; perhaps there were ways in which it might even strengthen the Establishment. To the Rector, whose father (nobody would have suspected it, and nobody was told) had risen to be a provincial corn-dealer, aristocratic heirship resembled regal heirship in excepting its possessor from the ordinary standard of moral judgments, Grandcourt, the almost certain baronet, the probable peer, was to be ranged with public personages, and was a match to be accepted on broad general grounds national and ecclesiastical. Such public personages, it is true, are often in the nature of giants which an ancient community may have felt pride and safety in possessing, though, regarded privately, these born eminences must often have been inconvenient and even noisome. But of the future husband personally Mr Gascoigne was disposed to think the best. Gossip is a sort of smoke that comes from the dirty tobacco-pipes of those who diffuse it: it proves nothing but the bad taste of the smoker. But if Grandcourt had really made any deeper or more unfortunate experiments in folly than were common in young men of high prospects, he was of an age to have finished them. All accounts can be suitably wound up when a man has not ruined himself, and the expense may be taken as an insurance against future error. This was the view of practical wisdom; with reference to higher views, repentance had a supreme moral and religious value. There was every reason to believe that a woman of well-regulated mind would be happy with Grandcourt.

It was no surprise to Gwendolen on coming down to tea to be told that her uncle wished to see her in the dining-room. He threw aside the paper as she entered and greeted her with his usual kindness. As his wife had remarked, he always ‘made much’ of Gwendolen, and her importance had risen of late. ‘My dear,’ he said, in a fatherly way, moving a chair for her as he held her hand, ‘I want to speak to you on a subject which is more momentous than any other with regard to your welfare. You will guess what I mean. But I shall speak to you with perfect directness: in such matters I consider myself bound to act as your father. You have no objection, I hope?’

‘Oh dear no, uncle. You have always been very kind to me,’ said Gwendolen, frankly. This evening she was willing, if it were possible, to be a little fortified against her troublesome self, and her resistant temper was in

abeyance. The Rector's mode of speech always conveyed a thrill of authority, as of a word of command: it seemed to take for granted that there could be no wavering in the audience, and that every one was going to be rationally obedient.

'It is naturally a satisfaction to me that the prospect of a marriage for you – advantageous in the highest degree – has presented itself so early. I do not know exactly what has passed between you and Mr Grandcourt, but I presume there can be little doubt, from the way in which he has distinguished you, that he desires to make you his wife.'

Gwendolen did not speak immediately, and her uncle said with more emphasis –

'Have you any doubt of that yourself, my dear?'

'I suppose that is what he has been thinking of. But he may have changed his mind to-morrow,' said Gwendolen.

'Why to-morrow? Has he made advances which you have discouraged?'

'I think he meant – he began to make advances – but I did not encourage them. I turned the conversation.'

'Will you confide in me so far as to tell me your reasons?'

'I am not sure that I had any reasons, uncle.' Gwendolen laughed rather artificially.

'You are quite capable of reflecting, Gwendolen. You are aware that this is not a trivial occasion, and that it concerns your establishment for life under circumstances which may not occur again. You have a duty here both to yourself and your family. I wish to understand whether you have any ground for hesitating as to your acceptance of Mr Grandcourt.'

'I suppose I hesitate without grounds.' Gwendolen spoke rather poutingly, and her uncle grew suspicious.

'Is he disagreeable to you personally?'

'No.'

'Have you heard anything of him which has affected you disagreeably?' The Rector thought it impossible that Gwendolen could have heard the gossip he had heard, but in any case he must endeavour to put all things in the right light for her.

'I have heard nothing about him except that he is a great match,' said Gwendolen, with some sauciness; 'and that affects me very agreeably.'

'Then, my dear Gwendolen, I have nothing further to say than this: you hold your fortune in your own hands – a fortune such as rarely happens to a girl in your circumstances – a fortune in fact which almost takes the question out of the range of mere personal feeling, and makes your acceptance of it a duty. If Providence offers you power and position – especially when unclogged by any conditions that are repugnant to you – your course is one of responsibility, into which caprice must not enter. A man does not like to have his attachment trifled with: he may not be at once repelled – these things are matters of individual disposition. But the trifling may be carried too far. And I must point out to you that in case Mr Grandcourt were repelled without your having refused him – without your having intended ultimately to refuse him, your situation would be a humiliating and painful one. I, for my part, should regard you with severe disapprobation, as the victim of nothing else than your own coquetry and folly.'

Gwendolen became pallid as she listened to this admonitory speech. The ideas it raised had the force of sensations. Her resistant courage would not help her here, because her uncle was not urging her against her own resolve; he was pressing upon her the motives of dread which she already felt; he was making her more conscious of the risks that lay within herself. She was silent, and the Rector observed that he had produced some strong effect.

'I mean this in kindness, my dear.' His tone had softened.

'I am aware of that, uncle,' said Gwendolen, rising and shaking her head back, as if to rouse herself out of painful passivity. 'I am not foolish. I know that I must be married some time – before it is too late. And I don't see how I could do better than marry Mr Grandcourt. I mean to accept him, if possible.' She felt as if she were reinforcing herself by speaking with this decisiveness to her uncle.

But the Rector was a little startled by so bare a version of his own meaning from those young lips. He wished that in her mind his advice should be taken in an infusion of sentiments proper to a girl, and such as are presupposed in the advice of a clergyman, although he may not consider them always appropriate to be put forward. He wished his niece parks, carriages, a title – everything that would make this world a pleasant abode; but he wished her not to be cynical – to be, on the contrary, religiously dutiful, and have warm domestic affections.

'My dear Gwendolen,' he said, rising also, and speaking with benignant gravity, 'I trust that you will find in marriage a new fountain of duty and affection. Marriage is the only true and satisfactory sphere of a woman, and if your marriage with Mr Grandcourt should be happily decided upon, you will have probably an increasing power, both of rank and wealth, which may be used for the benefit of others. These considerations are something higher than romance. You are fitted by natural gifts for a position which, considering your birth

and early prospects, could hardly be looked forward to as in the ordinary course of things; and I trust that you will grace it not only by those personal gifts, but by a good and consistent life.'

'I hope mamma will be the happier,' said Gwendolen, in a more cheerful way, lifting her hands backward to her neck and moving towards the door. She wanted to waive those higher considerations.

Mr Gascoigne felt that he had come to a satisfactory understanding with his niece, and had furthered her happy settlement in life by furthering her engagement to Grandcourt. Meanwhile there was another person to whom the contemplation of that issue had been a motive for some activity, and who believed that he too on this particular day had done something towards bringing about a favourable decision in *his* sense – which happened to be the reverse of the Rector's.

Mr Lush's absence from Diplow during Gwendolen's visit had been due not to any fear on his part of meeting that supercilious young lady, or of being abashed by her frank dislike, but to an engagement from which he expected important consequences. He was gone in fact to the Wanchester Station to meet a lady accompanied by a maid and two children, whom he put into a fly, and afterwards followed to the hotel of the Golden Keys in that town. An impressive woman, whom many would turn to look at again in passing; her figure was slim and sufficiently tall, her face rather emaciated, so that its sculpturesque beauty was the more pronounced, her crisp hair perfectly black, and her large anxious eyes also what we call black. Her dress was soberly correct, her age perhaps physically more advanced than the number of years would imply, but hardly less than seven-and-thirty. An uneasy-looking woman: her glance seemed to presuppose that people and things were going to be unfavourable to her, while she was nevertheless ready to meet them with resolution. The children were lovely – a dark-haired girl of six or more, a fairer boy of five. When Lush incautiously expressed some surprise at her having brought the children, she said, with a sharp-edged intonation –

'Did you suppose I should come wandering about here by myself? Why should I not bring all four if I liked?'

'Oh, certainly,' said Lush, with his usual fluent *nonchalance*.

He stayed an hour or so in conference with her, and rode back to Diplow in a state of mind that was at once hopeful and busily anxious as to the execution of the little plan on which his hopefulness was based. Grandcourt's marriage to Gwendolen Harleth would not, he believed, be much of a good to either of them, and it would plainly be fraught with disagreeables to himself. But now he felt confident enough to say inwardly, 'I will take, nay, I will lay odds that the marriage will never happen.'

Chapter Fourteen

I will not clothe myself in wreck – wear gems
Sawed from cramped finger-bones of women drowned;
Feel chilly vaporous hands of ireful ghosts
Clutching my necklace; trick my maiden breast
With orphans' heritage. Let your dead love
Marry its dead.

Gwendolen looked lovely and vigorous as a tall, newly-opened lily the next morning: there was a reaction of young energy in her, and yesterday's self-distrust seemed no more than the transient shiver on the surface of a full stream. The roving archery match in Cardell Chase was a delightful prospect for the sport's sake: she felt herself beforehand moving about like a wood-nymph under the beeches (in appreciative company), and the imagined scene lent a charm to further advances on the part of Grandcourt – not an impassioned lyrical Daphnis for the wood-nymph, certainly: but so much the better. To-day Gwendolen foresaw him making slow conversational approaches to a declaration, and foresaw herself awaiting and encouraging it according to the rational conclusion which she had expressed to her uncle.

When she came down to breakfast (after every one had left the table except Mrs Davilow) there were letters on her plate. One of them she read with a gathering smile, and then handed it to her mamma, who, on returning it, smiled also, finding new cheerfulness in the good spirits her daughter had shown ever since waking, and said –

'You don't feel inclined to go a thousand miles away?'

'Not exactly so far.'

'It was a sad omission not to have written again before this. Can't you write now – before we set out this morning?'

'It is not so pressing. To-morrow will do. You see they leave town to-day. I must write to Dover. They will be there till Monday.'

'Shall I write for you, dear – if it teases you?'

Gwendolen did not speak immediately, but after sipping her coffee answered brusquely, 'Oh no, let it be; I will write to-morrow.' Then, feeling a touch of compunction, she looked up and said with playful tenderness, 'Dear, old, beautiful mamma!'

'Old, child, truly.'

'Please don't, mamma! I meant old for darling. You are hardly twenty-five years older than I am. When you talk in that way my life shrivels up before me.'

'One can have a great deal of happiness in twenty-five years, my dear.'

'I must lose no time in beginning,' said Gwendolen, merrily. 'The sooner I get my palaces and coaches the better.'

'And a good husband who adores you, Gwen,' said Mrs Davilow, encouragingly.

Gwendolen put out her lips saucily and said nothing.

It was a slight drawback on her pleasure in starting that the Rector was detained by magistrate's business and would probably not be able to get to Cardell Chase at all that day. She cared little that Mrs Gascoigne and Anna chose not to go without him, but her uncle's presence would have seemed to make it a matter of course that the decision taken would be acted on. For decision in itself began to be formidable. Having come close to accepting Grandcourt, Gwendolen felt this lot of unhoped-for fulness rounding itself too definitely: when we take to wishing a great deal for ourselves, whatever we get soon turns into mere limitation and exclusion. Still there was the reassuring thought that marriage would be the gate into a larger freedom.

The place of meeting was a grassy spot called Green Arbour, where a bit of hanging wood made a sheltering amphitheatre. It was here that the coachful of servants with provisions had to prepare the picnic meal; and the warden of the Chase was to guide the roving archers so as to keep them within the due distance from this centre, and hinder them from wandering beyond the limit which had been fixed on – a curve that might be drawn through certain well-known points, such as the Double Oak, the Whispering Stones, and the High Cross. The plan was, to take only a preliminary stroll before luncheon, keeping the main roving expedition for

the more exquisite lights of the afternoon. The muster was rapid enough to save every one from dull moments of waiting, and when the groups began to scatter themselves through the light and shadow made here by closely neighbouring beeches and there by rarer oaks, one may suppose that a painter would have been glad to look on. This roving archery was far prettier than the stationary game, but success in shooting at variable marks was less favoured by practice, and the hits were distributed among the volunteer archers otherwise than they would have been in target-shooting. From this cause perhaps, as well as from the twofold distraction of being preoccupied and wishing not to betray her preoccupation, Gwendolen did not greatly distinguish herself in these first experiments, unless it were by the lively grace with which she took her comparative failure. She was in her white and green as on the day of the former archery meeting, when it made an epoch for her that she was introduced to Grandcourt; he was continually by her side now, yet it would have been hard to tell from mere looks and manner that their relation to each other had at all changed since their first conversation. Still there were other grounds that made most persons conclude them to be, if not engaged already, on the eve of being so. And she believed this herself. As they were all returning towards Green Arbour in divergent groups, not thinking at all of taking aim but merely chattering, words passed which seemed really the beginning of that end – the beginning of her acceptance. Grandcourt said, 'Do you know how long it is since I first saw you in this dress?'

'The archery meeting was on the 25th, and this is the 13th,' said Gwendolen, laughingly. 'I am not good at calculating, but I will venture to say that it must be nearly three weeks.'

A little pause, and then he said, 'That is a great loss of time.'

'That your knowing me has caused you? Pray don't be uncomplimentary: I don't like it.'

Pause again. 'It is because of the gain, that I feel the loss.'

Here Gwendolen herself left a pause. She was thinking, 'He is really very ingenious. He never speaks stupidly.' Her silence was so unusual, that it seemed the strongest of favourable answers, and he continued –

'The gain of knowing you makes me feel the time I lose in uncertainty. Do *you* like uncertainty?'

'I think I do, rather,' said Gwendolen, suddenly beaming on him with a playful smile. 'There is more in it.'

Grandcourt met her laughing eyes with a slow, steady look right into them, which seemed like vision in the abstract, and said, 'Do you mean more torment for me?'

There was something so strange to Gwendolen in this moment that she was quite shaken out of her usual self-consciousness. Blushing and turning away her eyes, she said, 'No, that would make me sorry.'

Grandcourt would have followed up this answer, which the change in her manner made apparently decisive of her favourable intention; but he was not in any way overcome so as to be unaware that they were now, within sight of everybody, descending the slope into Green Arbour, and descending it at an ill-chosen point where it began to be inconveniently steep. This was a reason for offering his hand in the literal sense to help her, she took it, and they came down in silence, much observed by those already on the level – among others by Mrs Arrowpoint, who happened to be standing with Mrs Davilow. That lady had now made up her mind that Grandcourt's merits were not such as would have induced Catherine to accept him, Catherine having so high a standard as to have refused Lord Slogan. Hence she looked at the tenant of Diplow with dispassionate eyes.

'Mr Grandcourt is not equal as a man to his uncle, Sir Hugo Mallinger – too languid. To be sure, Mr Grandcourt is a much younger man, but I shouldn't wonder if Sir Hugo were to outlive him, notwithstanding the difference of years. It is ill calculating on successions,' concluded Mrs Arrowpoint, rather too loudly.

'It is indeed,' said Mrs Davilow, able to assent with quiet cheerfulness, for she was so well satisfied with the actual situation of affairs that her habitual melancholy in their general unsatisfactoriness was altogether in abeyance.

I am not concerned to tell of the food that was eaten in that green refectory, or even to dwell on the glories of the forest scenery that spread themselves out beyond the level front of the hollow; being just now bound to tell a story of life at a stage when the blissful beauty of earth and sky entered only by narrow and oblique inlets into the consciousness, which was busy with a small social drama almost as little penetrated by a feeling of wider relations as if it had been a puppet-show. It will be understood that the food and champagne were of the best – the talk and laughter too, in the sense of belonging to the best society, where no one makes an invidious display of anything in particular, and the advantages of the world are taken with that high-bred depreciation which follows from being accustomed to them. Some of the gentlemen strolled a little and indulged in a cigar, there being a sufficient interval before four o'clock – the time for beginning to rove again. Among these, strange to say, was Grandcourt; but not Mr Lush, who seemed to be taking his pleasure quite generously to-day by making himself particularly serviceable, ordering everything for everybody, and by this activity becoming more than ever a blot on the scene to Gwendolen, though he kept himself amiably aloof from her, and never even looked at her obviously. When there was a general move to prepare for starting, it appeared that the bows had all been put under the charge of Lord Brackenshaw's valet, and Mr Lush was

concerned to save ladies the trouble of fetching theirs from the carriage where they were propped. He did not intend to bring Gwendolen's, but she, fearful lest he should do so, hurried to fetch it herself. The valet seeing her approach met her with it, and in giving it into her hand gave also a letter addressed to her. She asked no question about it, perceived at a glance that the address was in a lady's handwriting (of the delicate kind which used to be esteemed feminine before the present uncial period), and moving away with her bow in her hand, saw Mr Lush coming to fetch other bows. To avoid meeting him she turned aside and walked with her back towards the stand of carriages, opening the letter. It contained these words –

'If Miss Harleth is in doubt whether she should accept Mr Grandcourt, let her break from her party after they have passed the Whispering Stones and return to that spot. She will then hear something to decide her, but she can only hear it by keeping this letter a strict secret from every one. If she does not act according to this letter, she will repent, as the woman who writes it has repented. The secrecy Miss Harleth will feel herself bound in honour to guard.'

Gwendolen felt an inward shock, but her immediate thought was, 'It is come in time.' It lay in her youthfulness that she was absorbed by the idea of the revelation to be made, and had not even a momentary suspicion of contrivance that could justify her in showing the letter. Her mind gathered itself up at once into the resolution that she would manage to go unobserved to the Whispering Stones; and thrusting the letter into her pocket she turned back to rejoin the company, with that sense of having something to conceal which to her nature had a bracing quality and helped her to be mistress of herself.

It was a surprise to every one that Grandcourt was not, like the other smokers, on the spot in time to set out roving with the rest. 'We shall alight on him by-and-by,' said Lord Brackenshaw; 'he can't be gone far.' At any rate, no man could be waited for. This apparent forgetfulness might be taken for the distraction of a lover so absorbed in thinking of the beloved object as to forget an appointment which would bring him into her actual presence. And the good-natured Earl gave Gwendolen a distant jocose hint to that effect, which she took with suitable quietude. But the thought in her own mind was, 'Can he too be starting away from a decision?' It was not exactly a pleasant thought to her; but it was near the truth. 'Starting away,' however, was not the right expression for the languor of intention that came over Grandcourt, like a fit of diseased numbness, when an end seemed within easy reach: to desist then, when all expectation was to the contrary, became another gratification of mere will, sublimely independent of definite motive. At that moment he had begun a second large cigar in a vague, hazy obstinacy which, if Lush or any other mortal who might be insulted with impunity had interrupted by overtaking him with a request for his return, would have expressed itself by a slow removal of his cigar to say, in an under-tone, 'You'll be kind enough to go to the devil, will you?'

But he was not interrupted, and the rovers set off without any visible depression of spirits, leaving behind only a few of the less vigorous ladies, including Mrs Davilow, who preferred a quiet stroll free from obligation to keep up with others. The enjoyment of the day was soon at its highest pitch, the archery getting more spirited and the changing scenes of the forest from roofed grove to open glade growing lovelier with the lengthening shadows, and the deeply felt but undefinable gradations of the mellowing afternoon. It was agreed that they were playing an extemporised 'As you like it;' and when a pretty compliment had been turned to Gwendolen about her having the part of Rosalind, she felt the more compelled to be surpassing in liveliness. This was not very difficult to her, for the effect of what had happened to-day was an excitement which needed a vent, a sense of adventure rather than alarm, and a straining towards the management of her retreat so as not to be impeded.

The roving had been lasting nearly an hour before the arrival at the Whispering Stones, two tall conical blocks that leaned towards each other like gigantic grey-mantled figures. They were soon surveyed and passed by with the remark that they would be good ghosts on a starlit night. But a soft sunlight was on them now, and Gwendolen felt daring. The stones were near a fine grove of beeches where the archers found plenty of marks.

'How far are we from Green Arbour now?' said Gwendolen, having got in front by the side of the warden.

'Oh, not more than half a mile, taking along the avenue we're going to cross up there: but I shall take round a couple of miles, by the High Cross.'

She was falling back among the rest, when suddenly they seemed all to be hurrying obliquely forward under the guidance of Mr Lush, and lingering a little where she was, she perceived her opportunity of slipping away. Soon she was out of sight, and without running she seemed to herself to fly along the ground and count the moments nothing till she found herself back again at the Whispering Stones. They turned their blank grey sides to her: what was there on the other side? If there were nothing after all? That was her only dread now – to have to turn back again in mystification; and walking round the right-hand stone without pause, she found herself in front of some one whose large dark eyes met hers at a foot's distance. In spite of expectation she was startled and shrank back, but in doing so she could take in the whole figure of this stranger and perceive that she was unmistakeably a lady, and one who must once have been exceedingly handsome. She perceived, also, that a few yards from her were two children seated on the grass.

‘Miss Harleth?’ said the lady.

‘Yes.’ All Gwendolen’s consciousness was wonder.

‘Have you accepted Mr Grandcourt?’

‘No.’

‘I have promised to tell you something. And you will promise to keep my secret. However you may decide, you will not tell Mr Grandcourt, or any one else, that you have seen me?’

‘I promise.’

‘My name is Lydia Glasher. Mr Grandcourt ought not to marry any one but me. I left my husband and child for him nine years ago. Those two children are his, and we have two others – girls – who are older. My husband is dead now, and Mr Grandcourt ought to marry me. He ought to make that boy his heir.’

She looked towards the boy as she spoke, and Gwendolen’s eyes followed hers. The handsome little fellow was puffing out his cheeks in trying to blow a tiny trumpet which remained dumb. His hat hung backward by a string, and his brown curls caught the sun-rays. He was a cherub.

The two women’s eyes met again, and Gwendolen said proudly, ‘I will not interfere with your wishes.’ She looked as if she were shivering, and her lips were pale.

‘You are very attractive, Miss Harleth. But when he first knew me, I too was young. Since then my life has been broken up and embittered. It is not fair that he should be happy and I miserable, and my boy thrust out of sight for another.’

These words were uttered with a biting accent, but with a determined abstinence from anything violent in tone or manner. Gwendolen, watching Mrs Glasher’s face while she spoke, felt a sort of terror: it was as if some ghastly vision had come to her in a dream and said, ‘I am a woman’s life.’

‘Have you anything more to say to me?’ she asked in a low tone, but still proudly and coldly. The revulsion within her was not tending to soften her. Every one seemed hateful.

‘Nothing. You know what I wished you to know. You can inquire about me if you like. My husband was Colonel Glasher.’

‘Then I will go,’ said Gwendolen, moving away with a ceremonious inclination, which was returned with equal grace.

In a few minutes Gwendolen was in the beech grove again, but her party had gone out of sight and apparently had not sent in search of her, for all was solitude till she had reached the avenue pointed out by the warden. She determined to take this way back to Green Arbour, which she reached quickly; rapid movement seeming to her just now a means of suspending the thoughts which might prevent her from behaving with due calm. She had already made up her mind what step she would take.

Mrs Davilow was of course astonished to see Gwendolen returning alone, and was not without some uneasiness which the presence of other ladies hindered her from showing. In answer to her words of surprise Gwendolen said –

‘Oh, I have been rather silly. I lingered behind to look at the Whispering Stones, and the rest hurried on after something, so I lost sight of them. I thought it best to come home by the short way – the avenue that the warden had told me of. I’m not sorry after all. I had had enough walking.’

‘Your party did not meet Mr Grandcourt, I presume,’ said Mrs Arrowpoint, not without intention.

‘No,’ said Gwendolen, with a little flash of defiance, and a light laugh. ‘And we didn’t see any carvings on the trees either. Where can he be? I should think he has fallen into the pool or had an apoplectic fit.’

With all Gwendolen’s resolve not to betray any agitation, she could not help it that her tone was unusually high and hard, and her mother felt sure that something unpropitious had happened.

Mrs Arrowpoint thought that the self-confident young lady was much piqued, and that Mr Grandcourt was probably seeing reason to change his mind.

‘If you have no objection, mamma, I will order the carriage,’ said Gwendolen. ‘I am tired. And every one will be going soon.’

Mrs Davilow assented; but by the time the carriage was announced as ready – the horses having to be fetched from the stables on the warden’s premises – the roving party reappeared, and with them Mr Grandcourt.

‘Ah, there you are!’ said Lord Brackenshaw, going up to Gwendolen, who was arranging her mamma’s shawl for the drive. ‘We thought at first you had alighted on Grandcourt and he had taken you home. Lush said so. But after that we met Grandcourt. However, we didn’t suppose you could be in any danger. The warden said he had told you a near way back.’

‘You are going?’ said Grandcourt, coming up with his usual air, as if he did not conceive that there had been any omission on his part. Lord Brackenshaw gave place to him and moved away.

‘Yes, we are going,’ said Gwendolen, looking busily at her scarf which she was arranging across her shoulders Scotch fashion.

‘May I call at Offendene to-morrow?’

‘Oh yes, if you like,’ said Gwendolen, sweeping him from a distance with her eyelashes. Her voice was light and sharp as the first touch of frost.

Mrs Davilow accepted his arm to lead her to the carriage; but while that was happening, Gwendolen with incredible swiftness had got in advance of them, and had sprung into the carriage.

‘I got in, mamma, because I wished to be on this side,’ she said, apologetically. But she had avoided Grandcourt’s touch: he only lifted his hat and walked away – with the not unsatisfactory impression that she meant to show herself offended by his neglect.

The mother and daughter drove for five minutes in silence. Then Gwendolen said, ‘I intend to join the Langens at Dover, mamma. I shall pack up immediately on getting home, and set off by the early train. I shall be at Dover almost as soon as they are; we can let them know by telegraph.’

‘Good heavens, child! what can be your reason for saying so?’

‘My reason for saying it, mamma, is that I mean to do it.’

‘But why do you mean to do it?’

‘I wish to go away.’

‘Is it because you are offended with Mr Grandcourt’s odd behaviour in walking off to-day?’

‘It is useless to enter into such questions. I am not going in any case to marry Mr Grandcourt. Don’t interest yourself further about him.’

‘What can I say to your uncle, Gwendolen? Consider the position you place me in. You led him to believe only last night that you had made up your mind in favour of Mr Grandcourt.’

‘I am very sorry to cause you annoyance, mamma, dear, but I can’t help it,’ said Gwendolen, with still harder resistance in her tone. ‘Whatever you or my uncle may think or do, I shall not alter my resolve, and I shall not tell my reason. I don’t care what comes of it. I don’t care if I never marry any one. There is nothing worth caring for. I believe all men are bad, and I hate them.’

‘But need you set off in this way, Gwendolen?’ said Mrs Davilow, miserable and helpless.

‘Now, mamma, don’t interfere with me. If you have ever had any trouble in your own life, remember it and don’t interfere with me. If I am to be miserable, let it be by my own choice.’

The mother was reduced to trembling silence. She began to see that the difficulty would be lessened if Gwendolen went away.

And she did go. The packing was all carefully done that evening, and not long after dawn the next day Mrs Davilow accompanied her daughter to the railway station. The sweet dews of morning, the cows and horses looking over the hedges without any particular reason, the early travellers on foot with their bundles, seemed all very melancholy and purposeless to them both. The dingy torpor of the railway station, before the ticket could be taken, was still worse. Gwendolen had certainly hardened in the last twenty-four hours: her mother’s trouble evidently counted for little in her present state of mind, which did not essentially differ from the mood that makes men take to worse conduct when their belief in persons or things is upset. Gwendolen’s uncontrolled reading, though consisting chiefly in what are called pictures of life, had somehow not prepared her for this encounter with reality. Is that surprising? It is to be believed that attendance at the *opéra bouffe* in the present day would not leave men’s minds entirely without shock, if the manners observed there with some applause were suddenly to start up in their own families. Perspective, as its inventor remarked, is a beautiful thing. What horrors of damp huts, where human beings languish, may not become picturesque through aerial distance! What hymning of cancerous vices may we not languish over as sublimest art in the safe remoteness of a strange language and artificial phrase! Yet we keep a repugnance to rheumatism and other painful effects when presented in our personal experience.

Mrs Davilow felt Gwendolen’s new phase of indifference keenly, and as she drove back alone, the brightening morning was sadder to her than before.

Mr Grandcourt called that day at Offendene, but nobody was at home.

Chapter Fifteen

Festina lente – celerity should be contempered with cunctation.

– SIR THOMAS BROWNE

Gwendolen, we have seen, passed her time abroad in the new excitement of gambling, and in imagining herself an empress of luck, having brought from her late experience a vague impression that in this confused world it signified nothing what any one did, so that they amused themselves. We have seen, too, that certain persons, mysteriously symbolised as Grapnell and Co., having also thought of reigning in the realm of luck, and being also bent on amusing themselves, no matter how, had brought about a painful change in her family circumstances; whence she had returned home – carrying with her, against her inclination, a necklace which she had pawned and some one else had redeemed.

While she was going back to England, Grandcourt was coming to find her; coming, that is, after his own manner – not in haste by express straight from Diplow to Leubronn, where she was understood to be; but so entirely without hurry that he was induced by the presence of some Russian acquaintances to linger at Baden-Baden and make various appointments with them, which, however, his desire to be at Leubronn ultimately caused him to break. Grandcourt's passions were of the intermittent, flickering kind: never flaming out strongly. But a great deal of life goes on without strong passion: myriads of cravats are carefully tied, dinners attended, even speeches made proposing the health of august personages, without the zest arising from a strong desire. And a man may make a good appearance in high social positions – may be supposed to know the classics, to have his reserves on science, a strong though repressed opinion on politics, and all the sentiments of the English gentleman, at a small expense of vital energy. Also, he may be obstinate or persistent at the same low rate, and may even show sudden impulses which have a false air of daemonic strength because they seem inexplicable, though perhaps their secret lies merely in the want of regulated channels for the soul to move in – good and sufficient ducts of habit without which our nature easily turns to mere ooze and mud, and at any pressure yields nothing but a spurt or a puddle.

Grandcourt had not been altogether displeased by Gwendolen's running away from the splendid chance he was holding out to her. The act had some piquancy for him. He liked to think that it was due to resentment of his careless behaviour in Cardell Chase, which, when he came to consider it, did appear rather cool. To have brought her so near a tender admission, and then to have walked headlong away from further opportunities of winning the consent which he had made her understand him to be asking for, was enough to provoke a girl of spirit; and to be worth his mastering it was proper that she should have some spirit. Doubtless she meant him to follow her, and it was what he meant too. But for a whole week he took no measures towards starting, and did not even inquire where Miss Harleth was gone. Mr Lush felt a triumph that was mingled with much distrust; for Grandcourt had said no word to him about her, and looked as neutral as an alligator: there was no telling what might turn up in the slowly-churning chances of his mind. Still, to have put off a decision was to have made room for the waste of Grandcourt's energy.

The guests at Diplow felt more curiosity than their host. How was it that nothing more was heard of Miss Harleth? Was it credible that she had refused Mr Grandcourt? Lady Flora Hollis, a lively middle-aged woman, well endowed with curiosity, felt a sudden interest in making a round of calls with Mrs Torrington, including the Rectory, Offendene, and Quetcham, and thus not only got twice over, but also discussed with the Arrowpoints, the information that Miss Harleth was gone to Leubronn, with some old friends, the Baron and Baroness von Langen; for the immediate agitation and disappointment of Mrs Davilow and the Gascoignes had resolved itself into a wish that Gwendolen's disappearance should not be interpreted as anything eccentric or needful to be kept secret. The Rector's mind, indeed, entertained the possibility that the marriage was only a little deferred, for Mrs Davilow had not dared to tell him of the bitter determination with which Gwendolen had spoken. And in spite of his practical ability, some of his experience had petrified into maxims and quotations. Amaryllis fleeing desired that her hiding-place should be known; and that love will find out the way 'over the mountain and over the wave' may be said without hyperbole in this age of steam. Gwendolen, he conceived, was an Amaryllis of excellent sense but coquettish daring; the question was whether she had dared too much.

Lady Flora, coming back charged with news about Miss Harleth, saw no good reason why she should not try whether she could electrify Mr Grandcourt by mentioning it to him at table; and in doing so shot a few hints of a notion having got abroad that he was a disappointed adorer. Grandcourt heard with quietude, but with attention; and the next day he ordered Lush to bring about a decent reason for breaking up the party at Diplow by the end of another week, as he meant to go yachting to the Baltic or somewhere – it being impossible to stay at Diplow as if he were a prisoner on parole, with a set of people whom he had never wanted. Lush needed no clearer announcement that Grandcourt was going to Leubronn; but he might go after the manner of a creeping billiard-ball and stick on the way. What Mr Lush intended was to make himself indispensable so that he might go too, and he succeeded; Gwendolen's repulsion for him being a fact that only amused his patron, and made him none the less willing to have Lush always at hand.

This was how it happened that Grandcourt arrived at the *Czarina* on the fifth day after Gwendolen had left Leubronn, and found there his uncle, Sir Hugo Mallinger, with his family, including Deronda. It is not necessarily a pleasure either to the reigning power or the heir presumptive when their separate affairs – a touch of gout, say, in the one, and a touch of wilfulness in the other – happen to bring them to the same spot. Sir Hugo was an easy-tempered man, tolerant both of differences and defects; but a point of view different from his own concerning the settlement of the family estates fretted him rather more than if it had concerned Church discipline or the ballot, and faults were the less venial for belonging to a person whose existence was inconvenient to him. In no case could Grandcourt have been a nephew after his own heart; but as the presumptive heir to the Mallinger estates he was the sign and embodiment of a chief grievance in the baronet's life – the want of a son to inherit the lands, in no portion of which had he himself more than a life-interest. For in the ill-advised settlement which his father, Sir Francis, had chosen to make by will, even Diplow with its modicum of land had been left under the same conditions as the ancient and wide inheritance of the two Toppings – Diplow, where Sir Hugo had lived and hunted through many a season in his younger years, and where his wife and daughters ought to have been able to retire after his death.

This grievance had naturally gathered emphasis as the years advanced, and Lady Mallinger, after having had three daughters in quick succession, had remained for eight years till now that she was over forty without producing so much as another girl; while Sir Hugo, almost twenty years older, was at a time of life when, notwithstanding the fashionable retardation of most things from dinners to marriages, a man's hopefulness is apt to show signs of wear, until restored by second childhood.

In fact, he had begun to despair of a son, and this confirmation of Grandcourt's interest in the estates certainly tended to make his image and presence the more unwelcome; but, on the other hand, it carried circumstances which disposed Sir Hugo to take care that the relation between them should be kept as friendly as possible. It led him to dwell on a plan which had grown up side by side with his disappointment of an heir; namely, to try and secure Diplow as a future residence for Lady Mallinger and her daughters, and keep this pretty bit of the family inheritance for his own offspring in spite of that disappointment. Such knowledge as he had of his nephew's disposition and affairs encouraged the belief that Grandcourt might consent to a transaction by which he would get a good sum of ready money, as an equivalent for his prospective interest in the domain of Diplow and the moderate amount of land attached to it. If, after all, the unhoped-for son should be born, the money would have been thrown away, and Grandcourt would have been paid for giving up interests that had turned out good for nothing; but Sir Hugo set down this risk as *nil*, and of late years he had husbanded his fortune so well by the working of mines and the sale of leases that he was prepared for an outlay.

Here was an object that made him careful to avoid any quarrel with Grandcourt. Some years before, when he was making improvements at the Abbey, and needed Grandcourt's concurrence in his felling an obstructive mass of timber on the demesne, he had congratulated himself on finding that there was no active spite against him in his nephew's peculiar mind; and nothing had since occurred to make them hate each other more than was compatible with perfect politeness, or with any accommodation that could be strictly mutual.

Grandcourt, on his side, thought his uncle a superfluity and a bore, and felt that the list of things in general would be improved whenever Sir Hugo came to be expunged. But he had been made aware through Lush, always a useful medium, of the baronet's inclinations concerning Diplow, and he was gratified to have the alternative of the money in his mind: even if he had not thought it in the least likely that he would choose to accept it, his sense of power would have been flattered by his being able to refuse what Sir Hugo desired. The hinted transaction had told for something among the motives which had made him ask for a year's tenancy of Diplow, which it had rather annoyed Sir Hugo to grant, because the excellent hunting in the neighbourhood might decide Grandcourt not to part with his chance of future possession; – a man who has two places, in one of which the hunting is less good, naturally desiring a third where it is better. Also, Lush had thrown out to Sir Hugo the probability that Grandcourt would woo and win Miss Arrowpoint, and in that case ready money might be less of a temptation to him. Hence, on this unexpected meeting at Leubronn, the baronet felt much

curiosity to know how things had been going on at Diplow, was bent on being as civil as possible to his nephew, and looked forward to some private chat with Lush.

Between Deronda and Grandcourt there was a more faintly marked but peculiar relation, depending on circumstances which have yet to be made known. But on no side was there any sign of suppressed chagrin on the first meeting at the *table d'hôte*, an hour after Grandcourt's arrival; and when the quartette of gentlemen afterwards met on the terrace, without Lady Mallinger, they moved off together to saunter through the rooms, Sir Hugo saying as they entered the large *saal* –

'Did you play much at Baden, Grandcourt?'

'No; I looked on and betted a little with some Russians there.'

'Had you luck?'

'What did I win, Lush?'

'You brought away about two hundred,' said Lush.

'You are not here for the sake of the play, then?' said Sir Hugo.

'No; I don't care about play now. It's a confounded strain,' said Grandcourt, whose diamond ring and demeanour, as he moved along playing slightly with his whisker, were being a good deal stared at by rouged foreigners interested in a new milord.

'The fact is, somebody should invent a mill to do amusements for you, my dear fellow,' said Sir Hugo, 'as the Tartars get their praying done. But I agree with you; I never cared for play. It's monotonous – knits the brain up into meshes. And it knocks me up to watch it now. I suppose one gets poisoned with the bad air. I never stay here more than ten minutes. But where's your gambling beauty, Deronda? Have you seen her lately?'

'She's gone,' said Deronda, curtly.

'An uncommonly fine girl, a perfect Diana,' said Sir Hugo, turning to Grandcourt again. 'Really worth a little straining to look at her. I saw her winning, and she took it as coolly as if she had known it all beforehand. The same day Deronda happened to see her losing like wildfire, and she bore it with immense pluck. I suppose she was cleaned out, or was wise enough to stop in time. How do you know she's gone?'

'Oh, by the Visitor-list,' said Deronda, with a scarcely perceptible shrug. 'Vandernoodt told me her name was Harleth, and she was with the Baron and Baroness von Langen. I saw by the list that Miss Harleth was no longer there.'

This held no further information for Lush than that Gwendolen had been gambling. He had already looked at the list, and ascertained that Gwendolen had gone, but he had no intention of thrusting this knowledge on Grandcourt before he asked for it; and he had not asked, finding it enough to believe that the object of search would turn up somewhere or other.

But now Grandcourt had heard what was rather piquant, and not a word about Miss Harleth had been missed by him. After a moment's pause he said to Deronda –

'Do you know those people – the Langens?'

'I have talked with them a little since Miss Harleth went away. I knew nothing of them before.'

'Where is she gone – do you know?'

'She is gone home,' said Deronda, coldly, as if he wished to say no more. But then, from a fresh impulse, he turned to look markedly at Grandcourt, and added, 'But it is possible you know her. Her home is not far from Diplow: Offendene, near Wanchester.'

Deronda, turning to look straight at Grandcourt who was on his left hand, might have been a subject for those old painters who liked contrasts of temperament. There was a calm intensity of life and richness of tint in his face that on a sudden gaze from him was rather startling, and often made him seem to have spoken, so that servants and officials asked him automatically, 'What did you say, sir?' when he had been quite silent. Grandcourt himself felt an irritation, which he did not show except by a slight movement of the eyelids, at Deronda's turning round on him when he was not asked to do more than speak. But he answered, with his usual drawl, 'Yes, I know her,' and paused with his shoulder towards Deronda, to look at the gambling.

'What of her, eh?' asked Sir Hugo of Lush, as the three moved on a little way. 'She must be a new-comer at Offendene. Old Blenny lived there after the dowager died.'

'A little too much of her,' said Lush, in a low, significant tone; not sorry to let Sir Hugo know the state of affairs.

'Why? how?' said the baronet. They all moved out of the *salon* into a more airy promenade.

'He has been on the brink of marrying her,' Lush went on. 'But I hope it's off now. She's a niece of the clergyman – Gascoigne – at Pennicote. Her mother is a widow with a brood of daughters. This girl will have nothing, and is as dangerous as gunpowder. It would be a foolish marriage. But she has taken a freak against him, for she ran off here without notice, when he had agreed to call the next day. The fact is, he's here after her, but he was in no great hurry, and between his caprice and hers they are likely enough not to get together

again. But of course he has lost his chance with the heiress.'

Grandcourt joining them said, 'What a beastly den this is! – a worse hole than Baden. I shall go back to the hotel.'

When Sir Hugo and Deronda were alone, the baronet began –

'Rather a pretty story. That girl has something in her. She must be worth running after – has *de l'imprévu*. I think her appearance on the scene has bettered my chance of getting Diplow, whether the marriage comes off or not.'

'I should hope a marriage like that would not come off,' said Deronda, in a tone of disgust.

'What! are you a little touched with the sublime lash?' said Sir Hugo, putting up his glasses to help his short sight in looking at his companion. 'Are you inclined to run after her?'

'On the contrary,' said Deronda, 'I should rather be inclined to run away from her.'

'Why, you would easily cut out Grandcourt. A girl with her spirit would think you the finer match of the two,' said Sir Hugo, who often tried Deronda's patience by finding a joke in impossible advice. (A difference of taste in jokes is a great strain on the affections.)

'I suppose pedigree and land belong to a fine match,' said Deronda, coldly.

'The best horse will win in spite of pedigree, my boy. You remember Napoleon's *mot – Je suis un ancêtre*,' said Sir Hugo, who habitually undervalued birth, as men after dining well often agree that the good of life is distributed with wonderful equality.

'I am not sure that I want to be an ancestor,' said Deronda. 'It doesn't seem to me the rarest sort of origination.'

'You won't run after the pretty gambler, then?' said Sir Hugo, putting down his glasses.

'Decidedly not.'

This answer was perfectly truthful; nevertheless it had passed through Deronda's mind that under other circumstances he should have given way to the interest this girl had raised in him, and tried to know more of her. But his history had given him a stronger bias in another direction. He felt himself in no sense free.

Chapter Sixteen

> Men, like planets, have both a visible and an invisible history. The astronomer threads the darkness with strict deduction, accounting so for every visible arc in the wanderer's orbit; and the narrator of human actions, if he did his work with the same completeness, would have to thread the hidden pathways of feeling and thought which lead up to every moment of action, and to those moments of intense suffering which take the quality of action – like the cry of Prometheus, whose chained anguish seems a greater energy than the sea and sky he invokes and the deity he defies.

Deronda's circumstances, indeed, had been exceptional. One moment had been burnt into his life as its chief epoch – a moment full of July sunshine and large pink roses shedding their last petals on a grassy court enclosed on three sides by a Gothic cloister. Imagine him in such a scene: a boy of thirteen, stretched prone on the grass where it was in shadow, his curly head propped on his arms over a book, while his tutor, also reading, sat on a camp-stool under shelter. Deronda's book was Sismondi's History of the Italian Republics: – the lad had a passion for history, eager to know how time had been filled up since the Flood, and how things were carried on in the dull periods. Suddenly he let down his left arm and looked at his tutor, saying in purest boyish tones –

'Mr Fraser, how was it that the popes and cardinals always had so many nephews?'

The tutor, an able young Scotchman who acted as Sir Hugo Mallinger's secretary, roused rather unwillingly from his political economy, answered with the clear-cut, emphatic chant which makes a truth doubly telling in Scotch utterance –

'Their own children were called nephews.'

'Why?' said Deronda.

'It was just for the propriety of the thing; because, as you know very well, priests don't marry, and the children were illegitimate.'

Mr Fraser, thrusting out his lower lip and making his chant of the last word the more emphatic for a little impatience at being interrupted, had already turned his eyes on his book again, while Deronda, as if something had stung him, started up in a sitting attitude with his back to the tutor.

He had always called Sir Hugo Mallinger his uncle, and when it once occurred to him to ask about his father and mother, the baronet had answered, 'You lost your father and mother when you were quite a little one; that is why I take care of you.' Daniel then straining to discern something in that early twilight, had a dim sense of having been kissed very much, and surrounded by thin, cloudy, scented drapery, till his fingers caught in something hard, which hurt him, and he began to cry. Every other memory he had was of the little world in which he still lived. And at that time he did not mind about learning more, for he was too fond of Sir Hugo to be sorry for the loss of unknown parents. Life was very delightful to the lad, with an uncle who was always indulgent and cheerful – a fine man in the bright noon of life, whom Daniel thought absolutely perfect, and whose place was one of the finest in England, at once historical, romantic, and home-like: a picturesque architectural out-growth from an abbey, which had still remnants of the old monastic trunk. Diplow lay in another county, and was a comparatively landless place which had come into the family from a rich lawyer on the female side who wore the perruque of the Restoration; whereas the Mallingers had the grant of Monk's Topping under Henry the Eighth, and ages before had held the neighbouring lands of King's Topping, tracing indeed their origin to a certain Hugues le Malingre, who came in with the Conqueror – and also apparently with a sickly complexion which had been happily corrected in his descendants. Two rows of these descendants, direct and collateral, females of the male line, and males of the female, looked down in the gallery over the cloisters on the nephew Daniel as he walked there: men in armour with pointed beards and arched eyebrows, pinched ladies in hoops and ruffs with no face to speak of; grave-looking men in black velvet and stuffed hips, and fair, frightened women holding little boys by the hand; smiling politicians in magnificent perruques, and ladies of the prize-animal kind, with rosebud mouths and full eyelids, according to Lely; then a generation whose faces were revised and embellished in the taste of Kneller; and so on through refined editions of the family types in the time of Reynolds and Romney, till the line ended with Sir Hugo and his younger brother Henleigh. This last had married Miss Grandcourt, and taken her name along with her estates, thus making a junction between two equally old families, impaling the three Saracens' heads proper and three bezants of the one with the tower and falcons *argent* of the other, and, as it happened, uniting their

highest advantages in the prospects of that Henleigh Mallinger Grandcourt who is at present more of an acquaintance to us than either Sir Hugo or his nephew Daniel Deronda.

In Sir Hugo's youthful portrait with rolled collar and high cravat, Sir Thomas Lawrence had done justice to the agreeable alacrity of expression and sanguine temperament still to be seen in the original, but had done something more than justice in slightly lengthening the nose, which was in reality shorter than might have been expected in a Mallinger. Happily the appropriate nose of the family reappeared in his younger brother, and was to be seen in all its refined regularity in his nephew Mallinger Grandcourt. But in the nephew Daniel Deronda the family faces of various types, seen on the walls of the gallery, found no reflex. Still he was handsomer than any of them, and when he was thirteen might have served as model for any painter who wanted to image the most memorable of boys: you could hardly have seen his face thoroughly meeting yours without believing that human creatures had done nobly in times past, and might do more nobly in time to come. The finest childlike faces have this consecrating power, and make us shudder anew at all the grossness and basely-wrought griefs of the world, lest they should enter here and defile.

But at this moment on the grass among the rose-petals, Daniel Deronda was making a first acquaintance with those griefs. A new idea had entered his mind, and was beginning to change the aspect of his habitual feelings as happy careless voyagers are changed when the sky suddenly threatens and the thought of danger arises. He sat perfectly still with his back to the tutor, while his face expressed rapid inward transition. The deep blush, which had come when he first started up, gradually subsided; but his features kept that indescribable look of subdued activity which often accompanies a new mental survey of familiar facts. He had not lived with other boys, and his mind showed the same blending of child's ignorance with surprising knowledge which is oftener seen in bright girls. Having read Shakespeare as well as a great deal of history, he could have talked with the wisdom of a bookish child about men who were born out of wedlock and were held unfortunate in consequence, being under disadvantages which required them to be a sort of heroes if they were to work themselves up to an equal standing with their legally born brothers. But he had never brought such knowledge into any association with his own lot, which had been too easy for him ever to think about it – until this moment when there had darted into his mind with the magic of quick comparison, the possibility that here was the secret of his own birth, and that the man whom he called uncle was really his father. Some children, even younger than Daniel, have known the first arrival of care, like an ominous irremovable guest in their tender lives, on the discovery that their parents, whom they had imagined able to buy everything, were poor and in hard money troubles. Daniel felt the presence of a new guest who seemed to come with an enigmatic veiled face, and to carry dimly-conjectured, dreaded revelations. The ardour which he had given to the imaginary world in his books suddenly rushed towards his own history and spent its pictorial energy there, explaining what he knew, representing the unknown. The uncle whom he loved very dearly took the aspect of a father who held secrets about him – who had done him a wrong – yes, a wrong: and what had become of his mother, from whom he must have been taken away? – Secrets about which he, Daniel, could never inquire; for to speak or be spoken to about these new thoughts seemed like falling flakes of fire to his imagination. Those who have known an impassioned childhood will understand this dread of utterance about any shame connected with their parents. The impetuous advent of new images took possession of him with the force of fact for the first time told, and left him no immediate power for the reflection that he might be trembling at a fiction of his own. The terrible sense of collision between a strong rush of feeling and the dread of its betrayal, found relief at length in big slow tears, which fell without restraint until the voice of Mr Fraser was heard saying –

'Daniel, do you see that you are sitting on the bent pages of your book?'

Daniel immediately moved the book without turning round, and after holding it before him for an instant, rose with it and walked away into the open grounds, where he could dry his tears unobserved. The first shock of suggestion past, he could remember that he had no certainty how things really had been, and that he had been making conjectures about his own history, as he had often made stories about Pericles or Columbus, just to fill up the blanks before they became famous. Only there came back certain facts which had an obstinate reality, – almost like the fragments of a bridge, telling you unmistakeably how the arches lay. And again there came a mood in which his conjectures seemed like a doubt of religion, to be banished as an offence, and a mean prying after what he was not meant to know; for there was hardly a delicacy of feeling this lad was not capable of. But the summing up of all his fluctuating experience at this epoch was, that a secret impression had come to him which had given him something like a new sense in relation to all the elements of his life. And the idea that others probably knew things concerning him which they did not choose to mention, and which he would not have had them mention, set up in him a premature reserve which helped to intensify his inward experience. His ears were open now to words which before that July day would have passed by him unnoted; and round every trivial incident which imagination could connect with his suspicions, a newly-roused set of feelings were ready to cluster themselves.

One such incident a month later wrought itself deeply into his life. Daniel had not only one of those thrilling boy voices which seem to bring an idyllic heaven and earth before our eyes, but a fine musical instinct, and had early made out accompaniments for himself on the piano, while he sang from memory. Since then he had had some teaching, and Sir Hugo, who delighted in the boy, used to ask for his music in the presence of guests. One morning after he had been singing 'Sweet Echo' before a small party of gentlemen whom the rain had kept in the house, the baronet, passing from a smiling remark to his next neighbour, said –

'Come here, Dan!'

The boy came forward with unusual reluctance. He wore an embroidered holland blouse which set off the rich colouring of his head and throat, and the resistant gravity about his mouth and eyes as he was being smiled upon, made their beauty the more impressive. Every one was admiring him.

'What do you say to being a great singer? Should you like to be adored by the world and take the house by storm, like Mario and Tamberlik?'

Daniel reddened instantaneously, but there was a just perceptible interval before he answered with angry decision –

'No; I should hate it!'

'Well, well, well!' said Sir Hugo, with surprised kindliness intended to be soothing. But Daniel turned away quickly, left the room, and going to his own chamber threw himself on the broad window-sill, which was a favourite retreat of his when he had nothing particular to do. Here he could see the rain gradually subsiding with gleams through the parting clouds which lit up a great reach of the park, where the old oaks stood apart from each other, and the bordering wood was pierced with a green glade which met the eastern sky. This was a scene which had always been part of his home – part of the dignified ease which had been a matter of course in his life. And his ardent clinging nature had appropriated it all with affection. He knew a great deal of what it was to be a gentleman by inheritance, and without thinking much about himself – for he was a boy of active perceptions and easily forgot his own existence in that of Robert Bruce – he had never supposed that he could be shut out from such a lot, or have a very different part in the world from that of the uncle who petted him. It is possible (though not greatly believed in at present) to be fond of poverty and take it for a bride, to prefer scoured deal, red quarries, and whitewash for one's private surroundings, to delight in no splendour but what has open doors for the whole nation, and to glory in having no privilege except such as nature insists on; and noblemen have been known to run away from elaborate ease and the option of idleness, that they might bind themselves for small pay to hard-handed labour. But Daniel's tastes were altogether in keeping with his nurture: his disposition was one in which everyday scenes and habits beget not *ennui* or rebellion, but delight, affection, aptitudes; and now the lad had been stung to the quick by the idea that his uncle – perhaps his father – thought of a career for him which was totally unlike his own, and which he knew very well was not thought of among possible destinations for the sons of English gentlemen. He had often stayed in London with Sir Hugo, who to indulge the boy's ear had carried him to the opera to hear the great tenors, so that the image of a singer taking the house by storm was very vivid to him; but now, spite of his musical gift, he set himself bitterly against the notion of being dressed up to sing before all those fine people who would not care about him except as a wonderful toy. That Sir Hugo should have thought of him in that position for a moment, seemed to Daniel an unmistakeable proof that there was something about his birth which threw him out from the class of gentlemen to which the baronet belonged. Would it ever be mentioned to him? Would the time come when his uncle would tell him everything? He shrank from the prospect: in his imagination he preferred ignorance. If his father had been wicked – Daniel inwardly used strong words, for he was feeling the injury done him as a maimed boy feels the crushed limb which for others is merely reckoned in an average of accidents – if his father had done any wrong, he wished it might never be spoken of to him: it was already a cutting thought that such knowledge might be in other minds. Was it in Mr Fraser's? probably not, else he would not have spoken in that way about the Pope's nephews? Daniel fancied, as older people do, that every one else's consciousness was as active as his own on a matter which was vital to him. Did Turvey the valet know? – and old Mrs French the housekeeper? – and Banks the bailiff, with whom he had ridden about the farms on his pony? – And now there came back the recollection of a day some years before when he was drinking Mrs Banks's whey, and Banks said to his wife with a wink and a cunning laugh, 'He features the mother, eh?' At that time little Daniel had merely thought that Banks made a silly face, as the common farming men often did – laughing at what was not laughable; and he rather resented being winked at and talked of as if he did not understand everything. But now that small incident became information: it was to be reasoned on. How could he be like his mother and not like his father? His mother must have been a Mallinger, if Sir Hugo were his uncle. But no! His father might have been Sir Hugo's brother and have changed his name, as Mr Henleigh Mallinger did when he married Miss Grandcourt. But then, why had he never heard Sir Hugo speak of his brother Deronda, as he spoke of his brother Grandcourt? Daniel had never before cared about the family tree – only about that ancestor who had killed three Saracens in one encounter. But now his mind

turned to a cabinet of estate-maps in the library, where he had once seen an illuminated parchment hanging out, that Sir Hugo said was the family tree. The phrase was new and odd to him – he was a little fellow then, hardly more than half his present age – and he gave it no precise meaning. He knew more now and wished that he could examine that parchment. He imagined that the cabinet was always locked, and longed to try it. But here he checked himself. He might be seen; and he would never bring himself near even a silent admission of the sore that had opened in him.

It is in such experiences of boy or girlhood, while elders are debating whether most education lies in science or literature, that the main lines of character are often laid down. If Daniel had been of a less ardently affectionate nature, the reserve about himself and the supposition that others had something to his disadvantage in their minds, might have turned into a hard, proud antagonism. But inborn lovingness was strong enough to keep itself level with resentment. There was hardly any creature in his habitual world that he was not fond of; teasing them occasionally, of course – all except his uncle, or 'Nunc,' as Sir Hugo had taught him to say; for the baronet was the reverse of a strait-laced man, and left his dignity to take care of itself. Him Daniel loved in that deep-rooted filial way which makes children always the happier for being in the same room with father or mother, though their occupations may be quite apart. Sir Hugo's watch-chain and seals, his handwriting, his mode of smoking and of talking to his dogs and horses, had all a rightness and charm about them to the boy which went along with the happiness of morning and breakfast time. That Sir Hugo had always been a Whig, made Tories and Radicals equally opponents of the truest and best; and the books he had written were all seen under the same consecration of loving belief which differenced what was his from what was not his, in spite of general resemblance. Those writings were various, from volumes of travel in the brilliant style, to articles on things in general, and pamphlets on political crises; but to Daniel they were alike in having an unquestionable rightness by which other people's information could be tested.

Who cannot imagine the bitterness of a first suspicion that something in this object of complete love was *not* quite right? Children demand that their heroes should be fleckless, and easily believe them so: perhaps a first discovery to the contrary is hardly a less revolutionary shock to a passionate child than the threatened downfull of habitual beliefs which makes the world seem to totter for us in maturer life.

But some time after this renewal of Daniel's agitation it appeared that Sir Hugo must have been making a merely playful experiment in his question about the singing. He sent for Daniel into the library, and looking up from his writing as the boy entered threw himself sideways in his arm-chair. 'Ah, Dan!' he said kindly, drawing one of the old embroidered stools close to him. 'Come and sit down here.'

Daniel obeyed, and Sir Hugo put a gentle hand on his shoulder, looking at him affectionately.

'What is it, my boy? Have you heard anything that has put you out of spirits lately?'

Daniel was determined not to let the tears come, but he could not speak.

'All changes are painful when people have been happy, you know,' said Sir Hugo, lifting his hand from the boy's shoulder to his dark curls and rubbing them gently. 'You can't be educated exactly as I wish you to be without our parting. And I think you will find a great deal to like at school.'

This was not what Daniel expected, and was so far a relief, which gave him spirit to answer –

'Am I to go to school?'

'Yes, I mean you to go to Eton. I wish you to have the education of an English gentleman; and for that it is necessary that you should go to a public school in preparation for the university: Cambridge I mean you to go to; it was my own university.'

Daniel's colour came and went.

'What do you say, sirrah?' said Sir Hugo, smiling.

'I should like to be a gentleman,' said Daniel, with firm distinctness, 'and go to school, if that is what a gentleman's son must do.'

Sir Hugo watched him silently for a few moments, thinking he understood now why the lad had seemed angry at the notion of becoming a singer. Then he said tenderly –

'And so you won't mind about leaving your old Nunc?'

'Yes, I shall,' said Daniel, clasping Sir Hugo's caressing arm with both his hands. 'But shan't I come home and be with you in the holidays?'

'Oh yes, generally,' said Sir Hugo. 'But now I mean you to go at once to a new tutor, to break the change for you before you go to Eton.'

After this interview Daniel's spirit rose again. He was meant to be a gentleman, and in some unaccountable way it might be that his conjectures were all wrong. The very keenness of the lad taught him to find comfort in his ignorance. While he was busying his mind in the construction of possibilities, it became plain to him that there must be possibilities of which he knew nothing. He left off brooding, young joy and the spirit of adventure not being easily quenched within him, and in the interval before his going away he sang about the house, danced among the old servants, making them parting gifts, and insisted many times to the groom on

the care that was to be taken of the black pony.

'Do you think I shall know much less than the other boys, Mr Fraser?' said Daniel. It was his bent to think that every stranger would be surprised at his ignorance.

'There are dunces to be found everywhere,' said the judicious Fraser. 'You'll not be the biggest; but you've not the makings of a Porson in you, or a Leibnitz either.'

'I don't want to be a Porson or a Leibnitz,' said Daniel. 'I would rather be a greater leader, like Pericles or Washington.'

'Ay, ay; you've a notion they did with little parsing, and less algebra,' said Fraser. But in reality he thought his pupil a remarkable lad, to whom one thing was as easy as another if he had only a mind to it.

Things went very well with Daniel in his new world, except that a boy with whom he was at once inclined to strike up a close friendship talked to him a great deal about his home and parents, and seemed to expect a like expansiveness in return. Daniel immediately shrank into reserve, and this experience remained a check on his naturally strong bent towards the formation of intimate friendships. Every one, his tutor included, set him down as a reserved boy, though he was so good-humoured and unassuming, as well as quick both at study and sport, that nobody called his reserve disagreeable. Certainly his face had a great deal to do with that favourable interpretation; but in this instance the beauty of the closed lips told no falsehood.

A surprise that came to him before his first vacation, strengthened the silent consciousness of a grief within, which might be compared in some ways with Byron's susceptibility about his deformed foot. Sir Hugo wrote word that he was married to Miss Raymond, a sweet lady whom Daniel must remember having seen. The event would make no difference about his spending the vacation at the Abbey; he would find Lady Mallinger a new friend whom he would be sure to love, – and much more to the usual effect when a man, having done something agreeable to himself, is disposed to congratulate others on his own good fortune, and the deducible satisfactoriness of events in general.

Let Sir Hugo be partly excused until the grounds of his action can be more fully known. The mistakes in his behaviour to Deronda were due to that dulness towards what may be going on in other minds, especially the minds of children, which is among the commonest deficiencies even in good-natured men like him, when life has been generally easy to themselves, and their energies have been quietly spent in feeling gratified. No one was better aware than he that Daniel was generally suspected to be his own son. But he was pleased with that suspicion; and his imagination had never once been troubled with the way in which the boy himself might be affected, either then or in the future, by the enigmatic aspect of his circumstances. He was as fond of him as could be, and meant the best by him. And considering the lightness with which the preparation of young lives seems to lie on respectable consciences, Sir Hugo Mallinger can hardly be held open to exceptional reproach. He had been a bachelor till he was five-and-forty, had always been regarded as a fascinating man of elegant tastes; what could be more natural, even according to the index of language, than that he should have a beautiful boy like the little Deronda to take care of? The mother might even perhaps be in the great world – met with in Sir Hugo's residences abroad. The only person to feel any objection was the boy himself, who could not have been consulted. And the boy's objections had never been dreamed of by anybody but himself.

By the time Deronda was ready to go to Cambridge, Lady Mallinger had already three daughters – charming babies, all three, but whose sex was announced as a melancholy alternative, the offspring desired being a son: if Sir Hugo had no son the succession must go to his nephew Mallinger Grandcourt. Daniel no longer held a wavering opinion about his own birth. His fuller knowledge had tended to convince him that Sir Hugo was his father, and he conceived that the baronet, since he never approached a communication on the subject, wished him to have a tacit understanding of the fact, and to accept in silence what would be generally considered more than the due love and nurture. Sir Hugo's marriage might certainly have been felt as a new ground of resentment by some youths in Deronda's position, and the timid Lady Mallinger with her fast-coming little ones might have been images to scowl at, as likely to divert much that was disposable in the feelings and possessions of the baronet from one who felt his own claim to be prior. But hatred of innocent human obstacles was a form of moral stupidity not in Deronda's grain; even the indignation which had long mingled itself with his affection for Sir Hugo took the quality of pain rather than of temper; and as his mind ripened to the idea of tolerance towards error, he habitually linked the idea with his own silent grievances.

The sense of an entailed disadvantage – the deformed foot doubtfully hidden by the shoe, makes a restlessly active spiritual yeast, and easily turns a self-centred, unloving nature into an Ishmaelite. But in the rarer sort, who presently see their own frustrated claim as one among a myriad, the inexorable sorrow takes the form of fellowship and makes the imagination tender. Deronda's early-wakened susceptibility, charged at first with ready indignation and resistant pride, had raised in him a premature reflection on certain questions of life; it had given a bias to his conscience, a sympathy with certain ills, and a tension of resolve in certain directions, which marked him off from other youths much more than any talents he possessed.

One day near the end of the Long Vacation, when he had been making a tour in the Rhineland with his Eton

tutor, and was come for a farewell stay at the Abbey before going to Cambridge, he said to Sir Hugo –

'What do you intend me to be, sir?' They were in the library, and it was the fresh morning. Sir Hugo had called him in to read a letter from a Cambridge Don who was to be interested in him; and since the baronet wore an air at once businesslike and leisurely, the moment seemed propitious for entering on a grave subject which had never yet been thoroughly discussed.

'Whatever your inclination leads you to, my boy. I thought it right to give you the option of the army, but you shut the door on that, and I was glad. I don't expect you to choose just yet – by-and-by, when you have looked about you a little more and tried your mettle among older men. The university has a good wide opening into the forum. There are prizes to be won, and a bit of good fortune often gives the turn to a man's taste. From what I see and hear, I should think you can take up anything you like. You are in deeper water with your classics than I ever got into, and if you are rather sick of that swimming, Cambridge is the place where you can go into mathematics with a will, and disport yourself on the dry sand as much as you like. I floundered along like a carp.'

'I suppose money will make some difference, sir,' said Daniel, blushing. 'I shall have to keep myself by-and-by.'

'Not exactly. I recommend you not to be extravagant – yes, yes, I know – you are not inclined to that; – but you need not take up anything against the grain. You will have a bachelor's income – enough for you to look about with. Perhaps I had better tell you that you may consider yourself secure of seven hundred a-year. You might make yourself a barrister – be a writer – take up politics. I confess that is what would please me best. I should like to have you at my elbow and pulling with me.'

Deronda looked embarrassed. He felt that he ought to make some sign of gratitude, but other feelings clogged his tongue. A moment was passing by in which a question about his birth was throbbing within him, and yet it seemed more impossible than ever that the question should find vent – more impossible than ever that he could hear certain things from Sir Hugo's lips. The liberal way in which he was dealt with was the more striking because the baronet had of late cared particularly for money, and for making the utmost of his life-interest in the estate by way of providing for his daughters; and as all this flashed through Daniel's mind it was momentarily within his imagination that the provision for him might come in some way from his mother. But such vaporous conjecture passed away as quickly as it came.

Sir Hugo appeared not to notice anything peculiar in Daniel's manner, and presently went on with his usual chatty liveliness.

'I am glad you have done some good reading outside your classics, and have got a grip of French and German. The truth is, unless a man can get the prestige and income of a Don and write donnish books, it's hardly worth while for him to make a Greek and Latin machine of himself and be able to spin you out pages of the Greek dramatists at any verse you'll give him as a cue. That's all very fine, but in practical life nobody does give you the cue for pages of Greek. In fact it's a nicety of conversation which I would have you attend to – much quotation of any sort, even in English, is bad. It tends to choke ordinary remark. One couldn't carry on life comfortably without a little blindness to the fact that everything has been said better than we can put it ourselves. But talking of Dons, I have seen a Don make a capital figure in society; and occasionally he can shoot you down a cartload of learning in the right place, which will tell in politics. Such men are wanted; and if you have any turn for being a Don, I say nothing against it.'

'I think there's not much chance of that. Quicksett and Puller are both stronger than I am. I hope you will not be much disappointed if I don't come out with high honours.'

'No, no. I should like you to do yourself credit, but for God's sake don't come out as a superior expensive kind of idiot, like young Brecon, who got a Double First, and has been learning to knit braces ever since. What I wish you to get is a passport in life. I don't go against our university system: we want a little disinterested culture to make head against cotton and capital, especially in the House. My Greek has all evaporated: if I had to construe a verse on a sudden, I should get an apoplectic fit. But it formed my taste. I daresay my English is the better for it.'

On this point Daniel kept a respectful silence. The enthusiastic belief in Sir Hugo's writings as a standard, and in the Whigs as the chosen race among politicians, had gradually vanished along with the seraphic boy's face. He had not been the hardest of workers at Eton. Though some kinds of study and reading came as easily as boating to him, he was not of the material that usually makes the first-rate Eton scholar. There had sprung up in him a meditative yearning after wide knowledge which is likely always to abate ardour in the fight for prize acquirement in narrow tracks. Happily he was modest, and took any second-rateness in himself simply as a fact, not as a marvel necessarily to be accounted for by a superiority. Still Mr Fraser's high opinion of the lad had not been altogether belied by the youth: Daniel had the stamp of rarity in a subdued fervour of sympathy, an activity of imagination on behalf of others, which did not show itself effusively, but was continually seen in acts of considerateness that struck his companions as moral eccentricity. 'Deronda would

have been first-rate if he had had more ambition' – was a frequent remark about him. But how could a fellow push his way properly when he objected to swop for his own advantage, knocked under by choice when he was within an inch of victory, and, unlike the great Clive, would rather be the calf than the butcher? It was a mistake, however, to suppose that Deronda had not his share of ambition: we know he had suffered keenly from the belief that there was a tinge of dishonour in his lot; but there are some cases, and his was one of them, in which the sense of injury breeds – not the will to inflict injuries and climb over them as a ladder, but – a hatred of all injury. He had his flashes of fierceness, and could hit out upon occasion, but the occasions were not always what might have been expected. For in what related to himself his resentful impulses had been early checked by a mastering affectionateness. Love has a habit of saying 'Never mind' to angry self, who, sitting down for the nonce in the lower place, by-and-by gets used to it. So it was that as Deronda approached manhood his feeling for Sir Hugo, while it was getting more and more mixed with criticism, was gaining in that sort of allowance which reconciles criticism with tenderness. The dear old beautiful home and everything within it, Lady Mallinger and her little ones included, were consecrated for the youth as they had been for the boy – only with a certain difference of light on the objects. The altar-piece was no longer miraculously perfect, painted under infallible guidance, but the human hand discerned in the work was appealing to a reverent tenderness safer from the gusts of discovery. Certainly Deronda's ambition, even in his spring-time, lay exceptionally aloof from conspicuous, vulgar triumph, and from other ugly forms of boyish energy; perhaps because he was early impassioned by ideas, and burned his fire on those heights. One may spend a good deal of energy in disliking and resisting what others pursue, and a boy who is fond of somebody else's pencil-case may not be more energetic than another who is fond of giving his own pencil-case away. Still, it was not Deronda's disposition to escape from ugly scenes: he was more inclined to sit through them and take care of the fellow least able to take care of himself. It had helped to make him popular that he was sometimes a little compromised by this apparent comradeship. For a meditative interest in learning how human miseries are wrought – as precocious in him as another sort of genius in the poet who writes a Queen Mab at nineteen – was so infused with kindliness that it easily passed for comradeship. Enough. In many of our neighbours' lives, there is much not only of error and lapse, but of a certain exquisite goodness which can never be written or even spoken – only divined by each of us, according to the inward instruction of our own privacy.

The impression he made at Cambridge corresponded to his position at Eton. Every one interested in him agreed that he might have taken a high place if his motives had been of a more pushing sort, and if he had not, instead of regarding studies as instruments of success, hampered himself with the notion that they were to feed motive and opinion – a notion which set him criticising methods and arguing against his freight and harness when he should have been using all his might to pull. In the beginning his work at the university had a new zest for him: indifferent to the continuation of the Eton classical drill, he applied himself vigorously to mathematics, for which he had shown an early aptitude under Mr Fraser, and he had the delight of feeling his strength in a comparatively fresh exercise of thought. That delight, and the favourable opinion of his tutor, determined him to try for a mathematical scholarship in the Easter of his second year: he wished to gratify Sir Hugo by some achievement, and the study of the higher mathematics, having the growing fascination inherent in all thinking which demands intensity, was making him a more exclusive worker than he had been before.

But here came the old check which had been growing with his growth. He found the inward bent towards comprehension and thoroughness diverging more and more from the track marked out by the standards of examination: he felt a heightening discontent with the wearing futility and enfeebling strain of a demand for excessive retention and dexterity without any insight into the principles which form the vital connections of knowledge. (Deronda's undergraduateship occurred fifteen years ago, when the perfection of our university methods was not yet indisputable.) In hours when his dissatisfaction was strong upon him he reproached himself for having been attracted by the conventional advantage of belonging to an English university, and was tempted towards the project of asking Sir Hugo to let him quit Cambridge and pursue a more independent line of study abroad. The germs of this inclination had been already stirring in his boyish love of universal history, which made him want to be at home in foreign countries, and follow in imagination the travelling students of the middle ages. He longed now to have the sort of apprenticeship to life which would not shape him too definitely, and rob him of the choice that might come from a free growth. One sees that Deronda's demerits were likely to be on the side of reflective hesitation, and this tendency was encouraged by his position: there was no need for him to get an immediate income, or to fit himself in haste for a profession; and his sensibility to the half-known facts of his parentage made him an excuse for lingering longer than others in a state of social neutrality. Other men, he inwardly said, had a more definite place and duties. But the project which flattered his inclination might not have gone beyond the stage of ineffective brooding, if certain circumstances had not quickened it into action.

The circumstances arose out of an enthusiastic friendship which extended into his after-life. Of the same

year with himself, and occupying small rooms close to his, was a youth who had come as an exhibitioner from Christ's Hospital, and had eccentricities enough for a Charles Lamb. Only to look at his pinched features and blond hair hanging over his collar reminded one of pale quaint heads by early German painters; and when this faint colouring was lit up by a joke, there came sudden creases about the mouth and eyes which might have been moulded by the soul of an aged humorist. His father, an engraver of some distinction, had been dead eleven years, and his mother had three girls to educate and maintain on a meagre annuity. Hans Meyrick – he had been daringly christened after Holbein – felt himself the pillar, or rather the knotted and twisted trunk, round which these feeble climbing plants must cling. There was no want of ability or of honest well-meaning affection to make the prop trustworthy: the ease and quickness with which he studied might serve him to win prizes at Cambridge, as he had done among the Blue Coats, in spite of irregularities. The only danger was, that the incalculable tendencies in him might be fatally timed, and that his good intentions might be frustrated by some act which was not due to habit but to capricious, scattered impulses. He could not be said to have any one bad habit; yet at longer or shorter intervals he had fits of impish recklessness, and did things that would have made the worst habits.

Hans in his right mind, however, was a lovable creature, and in Deronda he had happened to find a friend who was likely to stand by him with the more constancy, from compassion for these brief aberrations that might bring a long repentance. Hans, indeed, shared Deronda's rooms nearly as much as he used his own: to Deronda he poured himself out on his studies, his affairs, his hopes; the poverty of his home, and his love for the creatures there; the itching of his fingers to draw, and his determination to fight it away for the sake of getting some sort of plum that he might divide with his mother and the girls. He wanted no confidence in return, but seemed to take Deronda as an Olympian who needed nothing – an egotism in friendship which is common enough with mercurial, expansive natures. Deronda was content, and gave Meyrick all the interest he claimed, getting at last a brotherly anxiety about him, looking after him in his erratic moments, and contriving by adroitly delicate devices not only to make up for his friend's lack of pence, but to save him from threatening chances. Such friendship easily becomes tender: the one spreads strong sheltering wings that delight in spreading, the other gets the warm protection which is also a delight. Meyrick was going in for a classical scholarship, and his success, in various ways momentous, was the more probable from the steadying influence of Deronda's friendship.

But an imprudence of Meyrick's, committed at the beginning of the autumn term, threatened to disappoint his hopes. With his usual alternation between unnecessary expense and self-privation, he had given too much money for an old engraving which fascinated him, and to make up for it, had come from London in a third-class carriage with his eyes exposed to a bitter wind and any irritating particles the wind might drive before it. The consequence was a severe inflammation of the eyes, which for some time hung over him the threat of a lasting injury. This crushing trouble called out all Deronda's readiness to devote himself, and he made every other occupation secondary to that of being companion and eyes to Hans, working with him and for him at his classics, that if possible his chance of the classical scholarship might be saved. Hans, to keep the knowledge of his suffering from his mother and sisters, alleged his work as a reason for passing the Christmas at Cambridge, and his friend stayed up with him.

Meanwhile Deronda relaxed his hold on his mathematics, and Hans, reflecting on this, at length said, 'Old fellow, while you are hoisting me you are risking yourself. With your mathematical cram one may be like Moses or Mahomet or somebody of that sort who had to cram, and forgot in one day what it had taken him forty to learn.'

Deronda would not admit that he cared about the risk, and he had really been beguiled into a little indifference by double sympathy: he was very anxious that Hans should not miss the much-needed scholarship, and he felt a revival of interest in the old studies. Still, when Hans, rather late in the day, got able to use his own eyes, Deronda had tenacity enough to try hard and recover his lost ground. He failed, however, but he had the satisfaction of seeing Meyrick win.

Success, as a sort of beginning that urged completion, might have reconciled Deronda to his university course; but the emptiness of all things, from politics to pastimes, is never so striking to us as when we fail in them. The loss of the personal triumph had no severity for him, but the sense of having spent his time ineffectively in a mode of working which had been against the grain, gave him a distaste for any renewal of the process, which turned his imagined project of quitting Cambridge into a serious intention. In speaking of his intention to Meyrick he made it appear that he was glad of the turn events had taken – glad to have the balance dip decidedly, and feel freed from his hesitations; but he observed that he must of course submit to any strong objection on the part of Sir Hugo.

Meyrick's joy and gratitude were disturbed by much uneasiness. He believed in Deronda's alleged preference, but he felt keenly that in serving him Daniel had placed himself at a disadvantage in Sir Hugo's opinion, and he said mournfully, 'If you had got the scholarship, Sir Hugo would have thought that you asked

to leave us with a better grace. You have spoilt your luck for my sake, and I can do nothing to mend it.'

'Yes, you can; you are to be a first-rate fellow. I call that a first-rate investment of my luck.'

'Oh, confound it! You save an ugly mongrel from drowning, and expect him to cut a fine figure. The poets have made tragedies enough about signing one's self over to wickedness for the sake of getting something plummy; I shall write a tragedy of a fellow who signed himself over to be good, and was uncomfortable ever after.'

But Hans lost no time in secretly writing the history of the affair to Sir Hugo, making it plain that but for Deronda's generous devotion he could hardly have failed to win the prize he had been working for.

The two friends went up to town together: Meyrick to rejoice with his mother and the girls in their little home at Chelsea; Deronda to carry out the less easy task of opening his mind to Sir Hugo. He relied a little on the baronet's general tolerance of eccentricities, but he expected more opposition than he met with. He was received with even warmer kindness than usual, the failure was passed over lightly, and when he detailed his reasons for wishing to quit the university and go to study abroad, Sir Hugo sat for some time in a silence which was rather meditative than surprised. At last he said, looking at Daniel with examination, 'So you don't want to be an Englishman to the backbone after all?'

'I want to be an Englishman, but I want to understand other points of view. And I want to get rid of a merely English attitude in studies.'

'I see; you don't want to be turned out in the same mould as every other youngster. And I have nothing to say against your doffing some of our national prejudices. I feel the better myself for having spent a good deal of my time abroad. But, for God's sake, keep an English cut, and don't become indifferent to bad tobacco! And, my dear boy, it is good to be unselfish and generous; but don't carry that too far. It will not do to give yourself to be melted down for the benefit of the tallow-trade; you must know where to find yourself. However, I shall put no veto on your going. Wait until I can get off Committee, and I'll run over with you.'

So Deronda went according to his will. But not before he had spent some hours with Hans Meyrick, and been introduced to the mother and sisters in the Chelsea home. The shy girls watched and registered every look of their brother's friend, declared by Hans to have been the salvation of him, a fellow like nobody else, and, in fine, a brick. They so thoroughly accepted Deronda as an ideal, that when he was gone the youngest set to work, under the criticism of the two elder girls, to paint him as Prince Camaralzaman.

Chapter Seventeen

This is truth the poet sings,
That a sorrow's crown of sorrow is remembering happier things.

– TENNYSON: *Locksley Hall*

On a fine evening near the end of July, Deronda was rowing himself on the Thames. It was already a year or more since he had come back to England, with the understanding that his education was finished, and that he was somehow to take his place in English society; but though, in deference to Sir Hugo's wish, and to fence off idleness, he had begun to read law, this apparent decision had been without other result than to deepen the roots of indecision. His old love of boating had revived with the more force now that he was in town with the Mallingers, because he could nowhere else get the same still seclusion which the river gave him. He had a boat of his own at Putney and whenever Sir Hugo did not want him, it was his chief holiday to row till past sunset and come in again with the stars. Not that he was in a sentimental stage; but he was in another sort of contemplative mood perhaps more common in the young men of our day – that of questioning whether it were worth while to take part in the battle of the world: I mean, of course, the young men in whom the unproductive labour of questioning is sustained by three or five per cent on capital which somebody else has battled for. It puzzled Sir Hugo that one who made a splendid contrast with all that was sickly and puling should be hampered with ideas which, since they left an accomplished Whig like himself unobstructed, could be no better than spectral illusions; especially as Deronda set himself against authorship – a vocation which is understood to turn foolish thinking into funds.

Rowing in his dark-blue shirt and skull-cap, his curls closely clipped, his mouth beset with abundant soft waves of beard, he bore only disguised traces of the seraphic boy 'trailing clouds of glory.' Still, even one who had never seen him since his boyhood might have looked at him with slow recognition, due perhaps to the peculiarity of the gaze which Gwendolen chose to call 'dreadful,' though it had really a very mild sort of scrutiny. The voice, sometimes audible in subdued snatches of song, had turned out merely a high barytone; indeed, only to look at his lithe powerful frame and the firm gravity of his face would have been enough for an experienced guess that he had no rare and ravishing tenor such as nature reluctantly makes at some sacrifice. Look at his hands: they are not small and dimpled with tapering fingers that seem to have only a deprecating touch: they are long, flexible firmly-grasping hands, such as Titian has painted in a picture where he wanted to show the combination of refinement with force. And there is something of a likeness, too, between the faces belonging to the hands – in both the uniform pale-brown skin, the perpendicular brow, the calmly penetrating eyes. Not seraphic any longer: thoroughly terrestrial and manly; but still of a kind to raise belief in a human dignity which can afford to acknowledge poor relations.

Such types meet us here and there among average conditions; in a workman, for example, whistling over a bit of measurement and lifting his eyes to answer our question about the road. And often the grand meanings of faces as well as of written words may lie chiefly in the impressions of those who look on them. But it is precisely such impressions that happen just now to be of importance in relation to Deronda, rowing on the Thames in a very ordinary equipment for a young Englishman at leisure, and passing under Kew Bridge with no thought of an adventure in which his appearance was likely to play any part. In fact, he objected very strongly to the notion, which others had not allowed him to escape, that his appearance was of a kind to draw attention; and hints of this, intended to be complimentary, found an angry resonance in him, coming from mingled experiences, to which a clue has already been given. His own face in the glass had during many years been associated for him with thoughts of some one whom he must be like – one about whose character and lot he continually wondered, and never dared to ask.

In the neighbourhood of Kew Bridge, between six and seven o'clock, the river was no solitude. Several persons were sauntering on the towing-path, and here and there a boat was plying. Deronda had been rowing fast to get over this spot, when, becoming aware of a great barge advancing towards him, he guided his boat aside, and rested on his oar within a couple of yards of the river-brink. He was all the while unconsciously continuing the low-toned chant which had haunted his throat all the way up the river – the gondolier's song in the 'Otello,' where Rossini has worthily set to music the immortal words of Dante –

‘Nessun maggior dolore
Che ricordarsi del tempo felice
Nella miseria:’[6*]

and, as he rested on his oar, the pianissimo fall of the melodic wail ‘nella miseria’ was distinctly audible on the brink of the water. Three or four persons had paused at various spots to watch the barge passing the bridge, and doubtless included in their notice the young gentleman in the boat; but probably it was only to one ear that the low vocal sounds came with more significance than if they had been an insect-murmur amidst the sum of current noises. Deronda, awaiting the barge, now turned his head to the river-side, and saw at a few yards’ distance from him a figure which might have been an impersonation of the misery he was unconsciously giving voice to: a girl hardly more than eighteen, of low slim figure, with most delicate little face, her dark curls pushed behind her ears under a large black hat, a long woollen cloak over her shoulders. Her hands were hanging down clasped before her, and her eyes were fixed on the river with a look of immovable, statue-like despair. This strong arrest of his attention made him cease singing: apparently his voice had entered her inner world without her having taken any note of whence it came, for when it suddenly ceased she changed her attitude slightly, and, looking round with a frightened glance, met Deronda’s face. It was but a couple of moments, but that seems a long while for two people to look straight at each other. Her look was something like that of a fawn or other gentle animal before it turns to run away: no blush, no special alarm, but only some timidity which yet could not hinder her from a long look before she turned. In fact, it seemed to Deronda that she was only half conscious of her surroundings: was she hungry, or was there some other cause of bewilderment? He felt an outleap of interest and compassion towards her; but the next instant she had turned and walked away to a neighbouring bench under a tree. He had no right to linger and watch her: poorly-dressed, melancholy women are common sights; it was only the delicate beauty, the picturesque lines and colour of the image that were exceptional, and these conditions made it the more markedly impossible that he should obtrude his interest upon her. He began to row away, and was soon far up the river, but no other thoughts were busy enough quite to expel that pale image of unhappy girlhood. He fell again and again to speculating on the probable romance that lay behind that loneliness and look of desolation; then to smile at his own share in the prejudice that interesting faces must have interesting adventures; then to justify himself for feeling that sorrow was the more tragic when it befell delicate, childlike beauty.

‘I should not have forgotten the look of misery if she had been ugly and vulgar,’ he said to himself. But there was no denying that the attractiveness of the image made it likelier to last. It was clear to him as an onyx cameo: the brown-black drapery, the white face with small, small features and dark, long-lashed eyes. His mind glanced over the girl-tragedies that are going on in the world, hidden, unheeded, as if they were but tragedies of the copse or hedgerow, where the helpless drag wounded wings forsakenly, and streak the shadowed moss with the red moment-hand of their own death. Deronda of late, in his solitary excursions, had been occupied chiefly with uncertainties about his own course; but those uncertainties, being much at their leisure, were wont to have such wide-sweeping connections with all life and history that the new image of helpless sorrow easily blent itself with what seemed to him the strong array of reasons why he should shrink from getting into that routine of the world which makes men apologise for all its wrong-doing, and take opinions as mere professional equipment – why he should not draw strongly at any thread in the hopelessly-entangled scheme of things.

He used his oars little, satisfied to go with the tide and be taken back by it. It was his habit to indulge himself in that solemn passivity which easily comes with the lengthening shadows and mellowing light, when thinking and desiring melt together imperceptibly, and what in other hours may have seemed argument takes the quality of passionate vision. By the time he had come back again with the tide past Richmond Bridge the sun was near setting; and the approach of his favourite hour – with its deepening stillness, and darkening masses of tree and building between the double glow of the sky and the river – disposed him to linger as if they had been an unfinished strain of music. He looked out for a perfectly solitary spot where he could lodge his boat against the bank, and, throwing himself on his back with his head propped on the cushions, could watch out the light of sunset and the opening of that bead-roll which some oriental poet describes as God’s call to the little stars, who each answer, ‘Here am I.’ He chose a spot in the bend of the river just opposite Kew Gardens, where he had a great breadth of water before him reflecting the glory of the sky, while he himself was in shadow. He lay with his hands behind his head propped on a level with the boat’s edge, so that he could see all around him, but could not be seen by any one at a few yards’ distance; and for a long while he never turned his eyes from the view right in front of him. He was forgetting everything else in a half-speculative, half-involuntary identification of himself with the objects he was looking at, thinking how far it might be possible habitually to shift his centre till his own personality would be no less outside him than the landscape, – when the sense of something moving on the bank opposite him where it was bordered by a line of willow-bushes, made him turn his glance thitherward. In the first moment he had a darting presentiment

about the moving figure; and now he could see the small face with the strange dying sunlight upon it. He feared to frighten her by a sudden movement, and watched her with motionless attention. She looked round, but seemed only to gather security from the apparent solitude, hid her hat among the willows, and immediately took off her woollen cloak. Presently she seated herself and deliberately dipped the cloak in the water, holding it there a little while, then taking it out with effort, rising from her seat as she did so. By this time Deronda felt sure that she meant to wrap the wet cloak round her as a drowning-shroud; there was no longer time to hesitate about frightening her. He rose and seized his oar to ply across; happily her position lay a little below him. The poor thing, overcome with terror at this sign of discovery from the opposite bank, sank down on the brink again, holding her cloak but half out of the water. She crouched and covered her face as if she kept a faint hope that she had not been seen, and that the boatman was accidentally coming towards her. But soon he was within brief space of her, steadying his boat against the bank, and speaking, but very gently –

'Don't be afraid. … You are unhappy. … Pray, trust me. … Tell me what I can do to help you.'

She raised her head and looked up at him. His face now was towards the light, and she knew it again. But she did not speak for a few moments which were a renewal of their former gaze at each other. At last she said in a low sweet voice, with an accent so distinct that it suggested foreignness and yet was not foreign, 'I saw you before;' … and then added dreamily, after a like pause, 'nella miseria.'

Deronda, not understanding the connection of her thought, supposed that her mind was weakened by distress and hunger.

'It was you, singing?' she went on, hesitatingly – 'Nessun maggior dolore.' … The mere words themselves uttered in her sweet undertones seemed to give the melody to Deronda's ear.

'Ah, yes,' he said, understanding now, 'I am often singing them. But I fear you will injure yourself staying here. Pray let me carry you in my boat to some place of safety. And that wet cloak – let me take it.'

He would not attempt to take it without her leave, dreading lest he should scare her. Even at his words, he fancied that she shrank and clutched the cloak more tenaciously. But her eyes were fixed on him with a question in them as she said, 'You look good. Perhaps it is God's command.'

'Do trust me. Let me help you. I will die before I will let any harm come to you.'

She rose from her sitting posture, first dragging the saturated cloak and then letting it fall on the ground – it was too heavy for her tired arms. Her little woman's figure as she laid her delicate chilled hands together one over the other against her waist, and went a step backward while she leaned her head forward as if not to lose her sight of his face, was unspeakably touching.

'Great God!' the words escaped Deronda in a tone so low and solemn that they seemed like a prayer become unconsciously vocal. The agitating impression this forsaken girl was making on him stirred a fibre that lay close to his deepest interest in the fates of women – 'perhaps my mother was like this one.' The old thought had come now with a new impetus of mingled feeling, and urged that exclamation in which both East and West have for ages concentrated their awe in the presence of inexorable calamity.

The low-toned words seemed to have some reassurance in them for the hearer: she stepped forward close to the boat's side, and Deronda put out his hand, hoping now that she would let him help her in. She had already put her tiny hand into his which closed round it, when some new thought struck her, and drawing back she said –

'I have nowhere to go – nobody belonging to me in all this land.'

'I will take you to a lady who has daughters,' said Deronda, immediately. He felt a sort of relief in gathering that the wretched home and cruel friends he imagined her to be fleeing from were not in the near background. Still she hesitated, and said more timidly than ever –

'Do you belong to the theatre?'

'No; I have nothing to do with the theatre,' said Deronda, in a decided tone. Then beseechingly, 'I will put you in perfect safety at once; with a lady, a good woman; I am sure she will be kind. Let us lose no time: you will make yourself ill. Life may still become sweet to you. There are good people – there are good women who will take care of you.'

She drew backward no more, but stepped in easily, as if she were used to such action, and sat down on the cushions.

'You had a covering for your head,' said Deronda.

'My hat?' (she lifted up her hands to her head.) 'It is quite hidden in the bush.'

'I will find it,' said Deronda, putting out his hand deprecatingly as she attempted to rise. 'The boat is fixed.'

He jumped out, found the hat, and lifted up the saturated cloak, wringing it and throwing it into the bottom of the boat.

'We must carry the cloak away, to prevent any one who may have noticed you from thinking you have been drowned,' he said cheerfully, as he got in again and presented the old hat to her. 'I wish I had any other garment than my coat to offer you. But shall you mind throwing it over your shoulders while we are on the

water? It is quite an ordinary thing to do, when people return late and are not enough provided with wraps.' He held out the coat towards her with a smile, and there came a faint melancholy smile in answer, as she took it and put it on very cleverly.

'I have some biscuits – should you like them?' said Deronda.

'No; I cannot eat. I had still some money left to buy bread.'

He began to ply his oar without further remark, and they went along swiftly for many minutes without speaking. She did not look at him, but was watching the oar, leaning forward in an attitude of repose, as if she were beginning to feel the comfort of returning warmth and the prospect of life instead of death. The twilight was deepening; the red flush was all gone and the little stars were giving their answer one after another. The moon was rising, but was still entangled among trees and buildings. The light was not such that he could distinctly discern the expression of her features or her glance, but they were distinctly before him nevertheless – features and a glance which seemed to have given a fuller meaning for him to the human face. Among his anxieties one was dominant: his first impression about her, that her mind might be disordered, had not been quite dissipated: the project of suicide was unmistakeable, and gave a deeper colour to every other suspicious sign. He longed to begin a conversation, but abstained, wishing to encourage the confidence that might induce her to speak first. At last she did speak.

'I like to listen to the oar.'

'So do I.'

'If you had not come, I should have been dead now.'

'I cannot bear you to speak of that. I hope you will never be sorry that I came.'

'I cannot see how I shall be glad to live. The *maggior dolore* and the *miseria* have lasted longer than the *tempo felice*.' She paused and then went on dreamily, – '*Dolore – miseria* – I think those words are alive.'

Deronda was mute: to question her seemed an unwarrantable freedom; he shrank from appearing to claim the authority of a benefactor, or to treat her with the less reverence because she was in distress. She went on, musingly –

'I thought it was not wicked. Death and life are one before the Eternal. I know our fathers slew their children and then slew themselves, to keep their souls pure. I meant it so. But now I am commanded to live. I cannot see how I shall live.'

'You will find friends. I will find them for you.'

She shook her head and said mournfully, 'Not my mother and brother. I cannot find them.'

'You are English? You must be – speaking English so perfectly.'

She did not answer immediately, but looked at Deronda again, straining to see him in the doubtful light. Until now she had been watching the oar. It seemed as if she were half roused, and wondered which part of her impressions was dreaming and which waking. Sorrowful isolation had benumbed her sense of reality, and the power of distinguishing outward and inward was continually slipping away from her. Her look was full of wondering timidity, such as the forsaken one in the desert might have lifted to the angelic vision before she knew whether his message were in anger or in pity.

'You want to know if I am English?' she said at last, while Deronda was reddening nervously under a gaze which he felt more fully than he saw.

'I want to know nothing except what you like to tell me,' he said, still uneasy in the fear that her mind was wandering. 'Perhaps it is not good for you to talk.'

'Yes, I will tell you. I am English-born. But I am a Jewess.'

Deronda was silent, inwardly wondering that he had not said this to himself before, though any one who had seen delicate-faced Spanish girls might simply have guessed her to be Spanish.

'Do you despise me for it?' she said presently in low tones, which had a sadness that pierced like a cry from a small dumb creature in fear.

'Why should I?' said Deronda. 'I am not so foolish.'

'I know many Jews are bad.'

'So are many Christians. But I should not think it fair for you to despise me because of that.'

'My mother and brother were good. But I shall never find them. I am come a long way – from abroad. I ran away; but I cannot tell you – I cannot speak of it. I thought I might find my mother again – God would guide me. But then I despaired. This morning when the light came, I felt as if one word kept sounding within me – Never! never! But now – I begin – to think –' her words were broken by rising sobs – 'I am commanded to live – perhaps we are going to her.'

With an outburst of weeping she buried her head on her knees. He hoped that this passionate weeping might relieve her excitement. Meanwhile he was inwardly picturing in much embarrassment how he should present himself with her in Park Lane – the course which he had at first unreflectingly determined on. No one kinder and more gentle than Lady Mallinger, but it was hardly probable that she would be at home; and he

had a shuddering sense of a lackey staring at this delicate, sorrowful image of womanhood – of glaring lights and fine staircases, and perhaps chilling suspicious manners from lady's-maid and housekeeper, that might scare the mind already in a state of dangerous susceptibility. But to take her to any other shelter than a home already known to him was not to be contemplated: he was full of fears about the issue of the adventure which had brought on him a responsibility all the heavier for the strong and agitating impression this childlike creature had made on him. But another resource came to mind: he could venture to take her to Mrs Meyrick's – to the small home at Chelsea, where he had been often enough since his return from abroad to feel sure that he could appeal there to generous hearts, which had a romantic readiness to believe in innocent need and to help it. Hans Meyrick was safe away in Italy, and Deronda felt the comfort of presenting himself with his charge at a house where he would be met by a motherly figure of quakerish neatness, and three girls who hardly knew of any evil closer to them than what lay in history books and dramas, and would at once associate a lovely Jewess with Rebecca in 'Ivanhoe,' besides thinking that everything they did at Deronda's request would be done for their idol, Hans. The vision of the Chelsea home once raised, Deronda no longer hesitated.

The rumbling thither in the cab after the stillness of the water seemed long. Happily his charge had been quiet since her fit of weeping, and submitted like a tired child. When they were in the cab, she laid down her hat and tried to rest her head, but the jolting movement would not let it rest: still she dozed, and her sweet head hung helpless first on one side, then on the other.

'They are too good to have any fear about taking her in,' thought Deronda. Her person, her voice, her exquisite utterance, were one strong appeal to belief and tenderness. Yet what had been the history which had brought her to this desolation? He was going on a strange errand – to ask shelter for this waif. Then there occurred to him the beautiful story Plutarch somewhere tells of the Delphic women: how when the Maenads, outworn with their torch-lit wanderings, lay down to sleep in the market-place, the matrons came and stood silently round them to keep guard over their slumbers; then, when they waked, ministered to them tenderly and saw them safely to their own borders. He could trust the women he was going to for having hearts as good.

Deronda felt himself growing older this evening and entering on a new phase in finding a life to which his own had come – perhaps as a rescue; but how to make sure that snatching from death was rescue? The moment of finding a fellow-creature is often as full of mingled doubt and exultation as the moment of finding an idea.

Chapter Eighteen

Life is a various mother: now she dons
Her plumes and brilliants, climbs the marble stairs
With head aloft, nor ever turns her eyes
On lackeys who attend her; now she dwells
Grim-clad up darksome alleys, breathes hot gin,
And screams in pauper riot.

But to these

She came a frugal matron, neat and deft,
With cheerful morning thoughts and quick device
To find the much in little.

Mrs Meyrick's house was not noisy: the front parlour looked on the river, and the back on gardens, so that though she was reading aloud to her daughters, the window could be left open to freshen the air of the small double room where a lamp and two candles were burning. The candles were on a table apart for Kate, who was drawing illustrations for a publisher; the lamp was not only for the reader but for Amy and Mab, who were embroidering satin cushions for 'the great world.'

Outside, the house looked very narrow and shabby, the bright light through the holland blind showing the heavy old-fashioned window-frame; but it is pleasant to know that many such grim-walled slices of space in our foggy London have been, and still are the homes of a culture the more spotlessly free from vulgarity, because poverty has rendered everything like display an impersonal question, and all the grand shows of the world simply a spectacle which rouses no petty rivalry or vain effort after possession.

The Meyricks' was a home of that kind; and they all clung to this particular house in a row because its interior was filled with objects always in the same places, which for the mother held memories of her marriage time, and for the young ones seemed as necessary and uncriticised a part of their world as the stars of the Great Bear seen from the back windows. Mrs Meyrick had borne much stint of other matters that she might be able to keep some engravings specially cherished by her husband; and the narrow spaces of wall held a world-history in scenes and heads which the children had early learned by heart. The chairs and tables were also old friends preferred to new. But in these two little parlours with no furniture that a broker would have cared to cheapen except the prints and piano, there was space and apparatus for a wide-glancing, nicely-select life, open to the highest things in music, painting, and poetry. I am not sure that in the times of greatest scarcity, before Kate could get paid work, these ladies had always had a servant to light their fires and sweep their rooms; yet they were fastidious in some points, and could not believe that the manners of ladies in the fashionable world were so full of coarse selfishness, petty quarrelling, and slang as they are represented to be in what are called literary photographs. The Meyricks had their little oddities, streaks of eccentricity from the mother's blood as well as the father's, their minds being like mediaeval houses with unexpected recesses and openings from this into that, flights of steps and sudden outlooks.

But mother and daughters were all united by a triple bond – family love; admiration for the finest work, the best action; and habitual industry. Hans's desire to spend some of his money in making their lives more luxurious had been resisted by all of them, and both they and he had been thus saved from regrets at the threatened triumph of his yearning for art over the attractions of secured income – a triumph that would by-and-by oblige him to give up his fellowship. They could all afford to laugh at his Gavarnicaricatures and to hold him blameless in following a natural bent which their unselfishness and independence had left without obstacle. It was enough for them to go on in their old way, only having a grand treat of opera-going (to the gallery) when Hans came home on a visit.

Seeing the group they made this evening, one could hardly wish them to change their way of life. They were all alike small, and so in due proportion with their miniature rooms. Mrs Meyrick was reading aloud from a French book: she was a lively little woman, half French, half Scotch, with a pretty articulateness of speech that seemed to make daylight in her hearer's understanding. Though she was not yet fifty, her rippling hair, covered by a quakerish net cap, was chiefly grey, but her eyebrows were brown as the bright eyes below them; her black dress, almost like a priest's cassock with its row of buttons, suited a neat figure hardly five feet high. The daughters were to match the mother, except that Mab had Hans's light hair and complexion,

with a bossy irregular brow and other quaintnesses that reminded one of him. Everything about them was compact, from the firm coils of their hair, fastened back *à la Chinoise*, to their grey skirts in puritan nonconformity with the fashion, which at that time would have demanded that four feminine circumferences should fill all the free space in the front parlour. All four, if they had been wax-work, might have been packed easily in a fashionable lady's travelling trunk. Their faces seemed full of speech, as if their minds had been shelled, after the manner of horse-chestnuts, and become brightly visible. The only large thing of its kind in the room was Hafiz, the Persian cat, comfortably poised on the brown leather back of a chair, and opening his large eyes now and then to see that the lower animals were not in any mischief.

The book Mrs Meyrick had before her was Erckmann-Chatrian's *Histoire d'un Conscrit*. She had just finished reading it aloud, and Mab, who had let her work fall on the ground while she stretched her head forward and fixed her eyes on the reader, exclaimed –

'I think that is the finest story in the world.'

'Of course, Mab!' said Amy, 'it is the last you have heard. Everything that pleases you is the best in its turn.'

'It is hardly to be called a story,' said Kate. 'It is a bit of history brought near us with a strong telescope. We can see the soldiers' faces: no, it is more than that – we can hear everything – we can almost hear their hearts beat.'

'I don't care what you call it,' said Mab, flirting away her thimble. 'Call it a chapter in Revelations. It makes me want to do something good, something grand. It makes me so sorry for everybody. It makes me like Schiller – I want to take the world in my arms and kiss it. I must kiss you instead, little mother!' She threw her arms round her mother's neck.

'Whenever you are in that mood, Mab, down goes your work,' said Amy. 'It would be doing something good to finish your cushion without soiling it.'

'Oh – oh – oh!' groaned Mab, as she stooped to pick up her work and thimble. 'I wish I had three wounded conscripts to take care of.'

'You would spill their beef-tea while you were talking,' said Amy.

'Poor Mab! don't be hard on her,' said the mother. 'Give me the embroidery now, child. You go on with your enthusiasm, and I will go on with the pink and white poppy.'

'Well, ma, I think you are more caustic than Amy,' said Kate, while she drew her head back to look at her drawing.

'Oh – oh – oh!' cried Mab again, rising and stretching her arms. 'I wish something wonderful would happen. I feel like the deluge. The waters of the great deep are broken up, and the windows of heaven are opened. I must sit down and play the scales.'

Mab was opening the piano while the others were laughing at this climax, when a cab stopped before the house, and there forthwith came a quick rap of the knocker.

'Dear me!' said Mrs Meyrick, starting up, 'it is after ten, and Phoebe is gone to bed.' She hastened out, leaving the parlour door open.

'Mr Deronda!' The girls could hear this exclamation from their mamma. Mab clasped her hands, saying in a loud whisper, 'There now! something *is* going to happen;' Kate and Amy gave up their work in amazement. But Deronda's tone in reply was so low that they could not hear his words, and Mrs Meyrick immediately closed the parlour door.

'I know I am trusting to your goodness in a most extraordinary way,' Deronda went on, after giving his brief narrative, 'but you can imagine how helpless I feel with a young creature like this on my hands. I could not go with her among strangers, and in her nervous state I should dread taking her into a house full of servants. I have trusted to your mercy. I hope you will not think my act unwarrantable.'

'On the contrary. You have honoured me by trusting me. I see your difficulty. Pray bring her in. I will go and prepare the girls.'

While Deronda went back to the cab, Mrs Meyrick turned into the parlour again and said, 'Here is somebody to take care of instead of your wounded conscripts, Mab: a poor girl who was going to drown herself in despair. Mr Deronda found her only just in time to save her. He brought her along in his boat, and did not know what else it would be safe to do with her, so he has trusted us and brought her here. It seems she is a Jewess, but quite refined, he says – knowing Italian and music.'

The three girls, wondering and expectant, came forward and stood near each other in mute confidence that they were all feeling alike under this appeal to their compassion. Mab looked rather awe-stricken, as if this answer to her wish were something preternatural.

Meanwhile Deronda going to the door of the cab where the pale face was now gazing out with roused observation, said, 'I have brought you to some of the kindest people in the world: there are daughters like you. It is a happy home. Will you let me take you to them?'

She stepped out obediently, putting her hand in his and forgetting her hat; and when Deronda led her into

the full light of the parlour where the four little women stood awaiting her, she made a picture that would have stirred much duller sensibilities than theirs. At first she was a little dazed by the sudden light, and before she had concentrated her glance he had put her hand into the mother's. He was inwardly rejoicing that the Meyricks were so small: the dark-curled head was the highest among them. The poor wanderer could not be afraid of these gentle faces so near hers; and now she was looking at each of them in turn while the mother said, 'You must be weary, poor child.'

'We will take care of you – we will comfort you – we will love you,' cried Mab, no longer able to restrain herself, and taking the small right hand caressingly between both her own. This gentle welcoming warmth was penetrating the bewildered one: she hung back just enough to see better the four faces in front of her, whose goodwill was being reflected in hers, not in any smile, but in that undefinable change which tells us that anxiety is passing into contentment. For an instant she looked up at Deronda, as if she were referring all this mercy to him, and then again turning to Mrs Meyrick, said with more collectedness in her sweet tones than he had heard before –

'I am a stranger. I am a Jewess. You might have thought I was wicked.'

'No, we are sure you are good,' burst out Mab.

'We think no evil of you, poor child. You shall be safe with us,' said Mrs Meyrick. 'Come now and sit down. You must have some food, and then go to rest.'

The stranger looked up again at Deronda, who said –

'You will have no more fears with these friends? You will rest tonight?'

'Oh, I should not fear. I should rest. I think these are the ministering angels.'

Mrs Meyrick wanted to lead her to a seat, but again hanging back gently, the poor weary thing spoke as if with a scruple at being received without a further account of herself:

'My name is Mirah Lapidoth. I am come a long way, all the way from Prague by myself. I made my escape. I ran away from dreadful things. I came to find my mother and brother in London. I had been taken from my mother when I was little, but I thought I could find her again. I had trouble – the houses were all gone – I could not find her. It has been a long while, and I had not much money. That is why I am in distress.'

'Our mother will be good to you,' cried Mab. 'See what a nice little mother she is!'

'Do sit down now,' said Kate, moving a chair forward, while Amy ran to get some tea.

Mirah resisted no longer, but seated herself with perfect grace, crossing her little feet, laying her hands one over the other on her lap, and looking at her friends with placid reverence; whereupon Hafiz, who had been watching the scene restlessly, came forward with tail erect and rubbed himself against her ankles. Deronda felt it time to take his leave.

'Will you allow me to come again and inquire – perhaps at five to-morrow?' he said to Mrs Meyrick.

'Yes, pray; we shall have had time to make acquaintance then.'

'Good-bye,' said Deronda, looking down at Mirah, and putting out his hand. She rose as she took it, and the moment brought back to them both strongly the other moment when she had first taken that outstretched hand. She lifted her eyes to his and said with reverential fervour, 'The God of our fathers bless you and deliver you from all evil as you have delivered me. I did not believe there was any man so good. None before have thought me worthy of the best. You found me poor and miserable, yet you have given me the best.'

Deronda could not speak, but with silent adieux to the Meyricks, hurried away.

BOOK THREE

Maidens Choosing

Chapter Nineteen

> I pity the man who can travel from Dan to Beersheba, and say, ‘’Tis all barren;’ and so it is: and so is all the world to him who will not cultivate the fruits it offers.
>
> – STERNE: *Sentimental Journey*

To say that Deronda was romantic would be to misrepresent him; but under his calm and somewhat self-repressed exterior there was a fervour which made him easily find poetry and romance among the events of everyday life. And perhaps poetry and romance are as plentiful as ever in the world except for those phlegmatic natures who I suspect would in any age have regarded them as a dull form of erroneous thinking. They exist very easily in the same room with the microscope and even in railway carriages: what banishes them is the vacuum in gentlemen and lady passengers. How should all the apparatus of heaven and earth, from the farthest firmament to the tender bosom of the mother who nourished us, make poetry for a mind that has no movements of awe and tenderness, no sense of fellowship which thrills from the near to the distant, and back again from the distant to the near?

To Deronda this event of finding Mirah was as heart-stirring as anything that befell Orestes or Rinaldo. He sat up half the night, living again through the moments since he had first discerned Mirah on the river-brink, with the fresh and fresh vividness which belongs to emotive memory. When he took up a book to try and dull this urgency of inward vision, the printed words were no more than a network through which he saw and heard everything as clearly as before – saw not only the actual events of two hours, but possibilities of what had been and what might be which those events were enough to feed with the warm blood of passionate hope and fear. Something in his own experience caused Mirah’s search after her mother to lay hold with peculiar force on his imagination. The first prompting of sympathy was to aid her in the search: if given persons were extant in London there were ways of finding them, as subtle as scientific experiment, the right machinery being set at work. But here the mixed feelings which belonged to Deronda’s kindred experience naturally transfused themselves into his anxiety on behalf of Mirah.

The desire to know his own mother, or to know about her, was constantly haunted with dread; and in imagining what might befall Mirah it quickly occurred to him that finding the mother and brother from whom she had been parted when she was a little one might turn out to be a calamity. When she was in the boat she said that her mother and brother were good; but the goodness might have been chiefly in her own ignorant innocence and yearning memory, and the ten or twelve years since the parting had been time enough for much worsening. Spite of his strong tendency to side with the objects of prejudice, and in general with those who got the worst of it, his interest had never been practically drawn towards existing Jews, and the facts he knew about them, whether they walked conspicuous in fine apparel or lurked in by-streets, were chiefly of the sort most repugnant to him. Of learned and accomplished Jews he took it for granted that they had dropped their religion, and wished to be merged in the people of their native lands. Scorn flung at a Jew as such would have roused all his sympathy in griefs of inheritance; but the indiscriminate scorn of a race will often strike a specimen who has well earned it on his own account, and might fairly be gibbeted as a rascally son of Adam. It appears that the Caribs, who know little of theology, regard thieving as a practice peculiarly connected with Christian tenets, and probably they could allege experimental grounds for this opinion. Deronda could not escape (who can?) knowing ugly stories of Jewish characteristics and occupations; and though one of his favourite protests was against the severance of past and present history, he was like others who shared his protest, in never having cared to reach any more special conclusions about actual Jews than that they retained the virtues and vices of a long-oppressed race. But now that Mirah’s longing roused his mind to a closer survey of details, very disagreeable images urged themselves of what it might be to find out this middle-aged Jewess and her son. To be sure, there was the exquisite refinement and charm of the creature herself to make a presumption in favour of her immediate kindred, but – he must wait to know more: perhaps through Mrs Meyrick he might gather some guiding hints from Mirah’s own lips. Her voice, her accent, her looks – all the sweet purity that clothed her as with a consecrating garment made him shrink the more from giving her, either ideally or practically, an association with what was hateful or contaminating. But these fine words with which we fumigate and becloud unpleasant facts are not the language in which we think. Deronda’s thinking

went on in rapid images of what might be: he saw himself guided by some official scout into a dingy street; he entered through a dim doorway, and saw a hawk-eyed woman, rough-headed, and unwashed, cheapening a hungry girl's last bit of finery; or in some quarter only the more hideous for being smarter, he found himself under the breath of a young Jew talkative and familiar, willing to show his acquaintance with gentlemen's tastes, and not fastidious in any transactions with which they would favour him – and so on through the brief chapter of his experience in this kind. Excuse him: his mind was not apt to run spontaneously into insulting ideas, or to practise a form of wit which identifies Moses with the advertisement sheet; but he was just now governed by dread, and if Mirah's parents had been Christian, the chief difference would have been that his forebodings would have been fed with wider knowledge. It was the habit of his mind to connect dread with unknown parentage, and in this case as well as his own there was enough to make the connection reasonable.

But what was to be done with Mirah? She needed shelter and protection in the fullest sense, and all his chivalrous sentiment roused itself to insist that the sooner and the more fully he could engage for her the interest of others besides himself, the better he should fulfil her claims on him. He had no right to provide for her entirely, though he might be able to do so; the very depth of the impression she had produced made him desire that she should understand herself to be entirely independent of him; and vague visions of the future which he tried to dispel as fantastic left their influence in an anxiety stronger than any motive he could give for it, that those who saw his actions closely should be acquainted from the first with the history of his relation to Mirah. He had learned to hate secrecy about the grand ties and obligations of his life – to hate it the more because a strong spell of interwoven sensibilities hindered him from breaking such secrecy. Deronda had made a vow to himself that – since the truths which disgrace mortals are not all of their own making – the truth should never be made a disgrace to another by his act. He was not without terror lest he should break this vow, and fall into the apologetic philosophy which explains the world into containing nothing better than one's own conduct.

At one moment he resolved to tell the whole of his adventure to Sir Hugo and Lady Mallinger the next morning at breakfast, but the possibility that something quite new might reveal itself on his next visit to Mrs Meyrick's checked this impulse, and he finally went to sleep on the conclusion that he would wait until that visit had been made.

Chapter Twenty

> It will hardly be denied that even in this frail and corrupted world, we sometimes meet persons who, in their very mien and aspect, as well as in the whole habit of life, manifest such a signature and stamp of virtue, as to make our judgment of them a matter of intuition rather than the result of continued examination.
>
> – ALEXANDER KNOX: quoted in Southey's Life of Wesley

Mirah said that she had slept well that night; and when she came down in Mab's black dress, her dark hair curling in fresh fibrils as it gradually dried from its plenteous bath, she looked like one who was beginning to take comfort after the long sorrow and watching which had paled her cheek and made deep blue semicircles under her eyes. It was Mab who carried her breakfast and ushered her down – with some pride in the effect produced by a pair of tiny felt slippers which she had rushed out to buy because there were no shoes in the house small enough for Mirah, whose borrowed dress ceased about her ankles and displayed the cheap clothing that moulding itself on her feet seemed an adornment as choice as the sheaths of buds. The farthing buckles were bijoux.

'Oh, if you please, mamma!' cried Mab, clasping her hands and stooping towards Mirah's feet, as she entered the parlour; 'look at the slippers, how beautifully they fit! I declare she is like the Queen Budoor – "two delicate feet, the work of the protecting and all-recompensing Creator, support her; and I wonder how they can sustain what is above them." '

Mirah looked down at her own feet in a childlike way and then smiled at Mrs Meyrick, who was saying inwardly, 'One could hardly imagine this creature having an evil thought. But wise people would tell me to be cautious.' She returned Mirah's smile and said, 'I fear the feet have had to sustain their burthen a little too often lately. But to-day she will rest and be my companion.'

'And she will tell you so many things and I shall not hear them,' grumbled Mab, who felt herself in the first volume of a delightful romance and obliged to miss some chapters because she had to go to pupils.

Kate was already gone to make sketches along the river, and Amy was away on business errands. It was what the mother wished, to be alone with this stranger, whose story must be a sorrowful one, yet was needful to be told.

The small front parlour was as good as a temple that morning. The sunlight was on the river and soft air came in through the open window; the walls showed a glorious silent cloud of witnesses – the Virgin soaring amid her cherubic escort; grand Melancholia with her solemn universe; the Prophets and Sibyls; the School of Athens; the Last Supper; mystic groups where far-off ages made one moment; grave Holbein and Rembrandt heads; the Tragic Muse; last-century children at their musings or their play; Italian poets, – all were there through the medium of a little black and white. The neat mother who had weathered her troubles, and come out of them with a face still cheerful, was sorting coloured wools for her embroidery. Hafiz purred on the window-ledge, the clock on the mantelpiece ticked without hurry, and the occasional sound of wheels seemed to lie outside the more massive central quiet. Mrs Meyrick thought that this quiet might be the best invitation to speech on the part of her companion, and chose not to disturb it by remark. Mirah sat opposite in her former attitude, her hands clasped on her lap, her ankles crossed, her eyes at first travelling slowly over the objects around her, but finally resting with a sort of placid reverence on Mrs Meyrick. At length she began to speak softly.

'I remember my mother's face better than anything; yet I was not seven when I was taken away, and I am nineteen now.'

'I can understand that,' said Mrs Meyrick. 'There are some earliest things that last the longest.'

'Oh yes, it was the earliest. I think my life began with waking up and loving my mother's face: it was so near to me, and her arms were round me, and she sang to me. One hymn she sang so often, so often: and then she taught me to sing it with her: it was the first I ever sang. They were always Hebrew hymns she sang; and because I never knew the meaning of the words they seemed full of nothing but our love and happiness. When I lay in my little bed and it was all white above me, she used to bend over me between me and the white, and sing in a sweet low voice. I can dream myself back into that time when I am awake, and often it comes back to me in my sleep – my hand is very little, I put it up to her face and she kisses it. Sometimes in my dream I

begin to tremble and think that we are both dead; but then I wake up and my hand lies like this, and for a moment I hardly know myself. But if I could see my mother again, I should know her.'

'You must expect some change after twelve years,' said Mrs Meyrick, gently. 'See my grey hair: ten years ago it was bright brown. The days and the months pace over us like restless little birds, and leave the marks of their feet backwards and forwards; especially when they are like birds with heavy hearts – then they tread heavily.'

'Ah, I am sure her heart has been heavy for want of me. But to feel her joy if we could meet again, and I could make her know how I love her and give her deep comfort after all her mourning! If that could be, I should mind nothing; I should be glad that I have lived through my trouble. I did despair. The world seemed miserable and wicked; none helped me so that I could bear their looks and words; I felt that my mother was dead, and death was the only way to her. But then in the last moment – yesterday, when I longed for the water to close over me – and I thought that death was the best image of mercy – then goodness came to me living, and I felt trust in the living. And – it is strange – but I began to hope that she was living too. And now I am with you – here – this morning, peace and hope have come into me like a flood. I want nothing; I can wait; because I hope and believe and am grateful – oh, so grateful! You have not thought evil of me – you have not despised me.'

Mirah spoke with low-toned fervour, and sat as still as a picture all the while.

'Many others would have felt as we do, my dear,' said Mrs Meyrick, feeling a mist come over her eyes as she looked at her work.

'But I did not meet them – they did not come to me.'

'How was it that you were taken from your mother?'

'Ah, I am a long while coming to that. It is dreadful to speak of, yet I must tell you – I must tell you everything. My father – it was he who took me away. I thought we were only going on a little journey; and I was pleased. There was a box with all my little things in. But we went on board a ship, and got farther and farther away from the land. Then I was ill; and I thought it would never end – it was the first misery, and it seemed endless. But at last we landed. I knew nothing then, and believed what my father said. He comforted me, and told me I should go back to my mother. But it was America we had reached, and it was long years before we came back to Europe. At first I often asked my father when we were going back; and I tried to learn writing fast, because I wanted to write to my mother; but one day when he found me trying to write a letter, he took me on his knee and told me that my mother and brother were dead; that was why we did not go back. I remember my brother a little; he carried me once; but he was not always at home. I believed my father when he said that they were dead. I saw them under the earth when he said they were there, with their eyes for ever closed. I never thought of its not being true; and I used to cry every night in my bed for a long while. Then when she came so often to me, in my sleep, I thought she must be living about me though I could not always see her, and that comforted me. I was never afraid in the dark, because of that; and very often in the day I used to shut my eyes and bury my face and try to see her and to hear her singing. I came to do that at last without shutting my eyes.'

Mirah paused with a sweet content in her face, as if she were having her happy vision, while she looked out towards the river.

'Still your father was not unkind to you, I hope,' said Mrs Meyrick, after a minute, anxious to recall her.

'No; he petted me, and took pains to teach me. He was an actor; and I found out, after, that the "Coburg" I used to hear of his going to at home was a theatre. But he had more to do with the theatre than acting. He had not always been an actor; he had been a teacher, and knew many languages. His acting was not very good, I think; but he managed the stage, and wrote and translated plays. An Italian lady, a singer, lived with us a long time. They both taught me; and I had a master besides, who made me learn by heart and recite. I worked quite hard, though I was so little; and I was not nine when I first went on the stage. I could easily learn things, and I was not afraid. But then and ever since I hated our way of life. My father had money, and we had finery about us in a disorderly way; always there were men and women coming and going, there was loud laughing and disputing, strutting, snapping of fingers, jeering, faces I did not like to look at – though many petted and caressed me. But then I remembered my mother. Even at first when I understood nothing, I shrank away from all those things outside me into companionship with thoughts that were not like them; and I gathered thoughts very fast, because I read many things – plays and poetry, Shakespeare and Schiller, and learned evil and good. My father began to believe that I might be a great singer: my voice was considered wonderful for a child; and he had the best teaching for me. But it was painful that he boasted of me, and set me to sing for show at any minute, as if I had been a musical box. Once when I was nine years old, I played the part of a little girl who had been forsaken and did not know it, and sat singing to herself while she played with flowers. I did it without any trouble; but the clapping and all the sounds of the theatre were hateful to me; and I never liked the praise I had, because it seemed all very hard and unloving: I missed the love and the

trust I had been born into. I made a life in my own thoughts quite different from everything about me: I chose what seemed to me beautiful out of the plays and everything, and made my world out of it; and it was like a sharp knife always grazing me that we had two sorts of life which jarred so with each other – women looking good and gentle on the stage, and saying good things as if they felt them, and directly after I saw them with coarse, ugly manners. My father sometimes noticed my shrinking ways; and Signora said one day when I had been rehearsing, "She will never be an artist: she has no notion of being anybody but herself. That does very well now, but by-and-by you will see – she will have no more face and action than a singing-bird." My father was angry, and they quarrelled. I sat alone and cried, because what she had said was like a long unhappy future unrolled before me. I did not want to be an artist; but this was what my father expected of me. After a while Signora left us, and a governess used to come and give me lessons in different things, because my father began to be afraid of my singing too much; but I still acted from time to time. Rebellious feelings grew stronger in me, and I wished to get away from this life; but I could not tell where to go, and I dreaded the world. Besides, I felt it would be wrong to leave my father: I dreaded doing wrong, for I thought I might get wicked and hateful to myself, in the same way that many others seemed hateful to me. For so long, so long I had never felt my outside world happy; and if I got wicked I should lose my world of happy thoughts where my mother lived with me. That was my childish notion all through those years. Oh how long they were!'

Mirah fell to musing again.

'Had you no teaching about what was your duty?' said Mrs Meyrick. She did not like to say 'religion' – finding herself on inspection rather dim as to what the Hebrew religion might have turned into at this date.

'No – only that I ought to do what my father wished. He did not follow our religion at New York, and I think he wanted me not to know much about it. But because my mother used to take me to the synagogue, and I remembered sitting on her knee and looking through the railing and hearing the chanting and singing, I longed to go. One day when I was quite small I slipped out and tried to find the synagogue, but I lost myself a long while till a pedlar questioned me and took me home. My father, missing me, had been in much fear, and was very angry. I too had been so frightened at losing myself that it was long before I thought of venturing out again. But after Signora left us we went to rooms where our landlady was a Jewess and observed her religion. I asked her to take me with her to the synagogue; and I read in her prayer-books and Bible, and when I had money enough I asked her to buy me books of my own, for these books seemed a closer companionship with my mother: I knew that she must have looked at the very words and said them. In that way I have come to know a little of our religion, and the history of our people, besides piecing together what I read in plays and other books about Jews and Jewesses; because I was sure that my mother obeyed her religion. I had left off asking my father about her. It is very dreadful to say it, but I began to disbelieve him. I had found that he did not always tell the truth, and made promises without meaning to keep them; and that raised my suspicion that my mother and brother were still alive though he had told me that they were dead. For in going over the past again and again as I got older and knew more, I felt sure that my mother had been deceived, and had expected to see us back again after a very little while; and my father taking me on his knee and telling me that my mother and brother were both dead seemed to me now nothing but a bit of acting, to set my mind at rest. The cruelty of that falsehood sank into me, and I hated all untruth because of it. I wrote to my mother secretly: I knew the street, Colman Street, where we lived, and that it was near Blackfriars Bridge and the Coburg, and that our name was Cohen then, though my father called us Lapidoth, because, he said, it was a name of his forefathers in Poland. I sent my letter secretly; but no answer came, and I thought there was no hope for me. Our life in America did not last much longer. My father suddenly told me we were to pack up and go to Hamburg, and I was rather glad. I hoped we might get among a different sort of people, and I knew German quite well – some German plays almost all by heart. My father spoke it better than he spoke English. I was thirteen then, and I seemed to myself quite old – I knew so much, and yet so little. I think other children cannot feel as I did. I had often wished that I had been drowned when I was going away from my mother. But I set myself to obey and suffer: what else could I do? One day when we were on our voyage, a new thought came into my mind. I was not very ill that time, and I kept on deck a good deal. My father acted and sang and joked to amuse people on board, and I used often to overhear remarks about him. One day, when I was looking at the sea and nobody took notice of me, I overheard a gentleman say, "Oh, he is one of those clever Jews – a rascal, I shouldn't wonder. There's no race like them for cunning in the men and beauty in the women. I wonder what market he means that daughter for." When I heard this it darted into my mind that the unhappiness in my life came from my being a Jewess, and that always to the end the world would think slightly of me and that I must bear it, for I should be judged by that name; and it comforted me to believe that my suffering was part of the affliction of my people, my part in the long song of mourning that has been going on through ages and ages. For if many of our race were wicked and made merry in their wickedness – what was that but part of the affliction borne by the just among them, who were despised for the sins of their brethren? – But you have not rejected me.'

Mirah had changed her tone in this last sentence, having suddenly reflected that at this moment she had reason not for complaint but for gratitude.

'And we will try to save you from being judged unjustly by others, my poor child,' said Mrs Meyrick, who had now given up all attempt at going on with her work, and sat listening with folded hands and a face hardly less eager than Mab's would have been. 'Go on, go on: tell me all.'

'After that we lived in different towns – Hamburg and Vienna, the longest. I began to study singing again, and my father always got money about the theatres. I think he brought a good deal of money from America: I never knew why we left. For some time he was in great spirits about my singing, and he made me rehearse parts and act continually. He looked forward to my coming out in the opera. But by-and-by it seemed that my voice would never be strong enough – it did not fulfil its promise. My master at Vienna said, "Don't strain it further: it will never do for the public: – it is gold, but a thread of gold dust." My father was bitterly disappointed: we were not so well off at that time. I think I have not quite told you what I felt about my father. I knew he was fond of me and meant to indulge me, and that made me afraid of hurting him; but he always mistook what would please me and give me happiness. It was his nature to take everything lightly; and I soon left off asking him any question about things that I cared for much, because he always turned them off with a joke. He would even ridicule our own people; and once when he had been imitating their movements and their tones in praying, only to make others laugh, I could not restrain myself – for I always had an anger in my heart about my mother – and when we were alone, I said, "Father, you ought not to mimic our own people before Christians who mock them: would it not be bad if I mimicked you, that they might mock you?" But he only shrugged his shoulders and laughed and pinched my chin, and said, "You couldn't do it, my dear." It was this way of turning off everything, that made a great wall between me and my father, and whatever I felt most I took the most care to hide from him. For there were some things – when they were laughed at I could not bear it: the world seemed like a hell to me. Is this world and all the life upon it only like a farce or a vaudeville, where you find no great meanings? Why then are there tragedies and grand operas, where men do difficult things and choose to suffer? I think it is silly to speak of all things as a joke. And I saw that his wishing me to sing the greatest music, and parts in grand operas, was only wishing for what would fetch the greatest price. That hemmed in my gratitude for his affectionateness, and the tenderest feeling I had towards him was pity. Yes, I did sometimes pity him. He had aged and changed. Now he was no longer so lively. I thought he seemed worse – less good to others and to me. Every now and then in the latter years his gaiety went away suddenly, and he would sit at home silent and gloomy; or he would come in and fling himself down and sob, just as I have done myself when I have been in trouble. If I put my hand on his knee and said, "What is the matter, father?" he would make no answer, but would draw my arm round his neck and put his arm round me and go on crying. There never came any confidence between us; but oh, I was sorry for him. At those moments I knew he must feel his life bitter, and I pressed my cheek against his head and prayed. Those moments were what most bound me to him; and I used to think how much my mother once loved him, else she would not have married him.

'But soon there came the dreadful time. We had been at Pesth and we came back to Vienna. In spite of what my master Leo had said, my father got me an engagement, not at the opera, but to take singing parts at a suburb theatre in Vienna. He had nothing to do with the theatre then; I did not understand what he did, but I think he was continually at a gambling-house, though he was careful always about taking me to the theatre. I was very miserable. The plays I acted in were detestable to me. Men came about us and wanted to talk to me: women and men seemed to look at me with a sneering smile: it was no better than a fiery furnace. Perhaps I make it worse than it was – you don't know that life; but the glare and the faces, and my having to go on and act and sing what I hated, and then see people who came to stare at me behind the scenes – it was all so much worse than when I was a little girl. I went through with it; I did it; I had set my mind to obey my father and work, for I saw nothing better that I could do. But I felt that my voice was getting weaker, and I knew that my acting was not good except when it was not really acting, but the part was one that I could be myself in, and some feeling within me carried me along. That was seldom.

'Then in the midst of all this, the news came to me one morning that my father had been taken to prison, and he had sent for me. He did not tell me the reason why he was there, but he ordered me to go to an address he gave me, to see a Count who would be able to get him released. The address was to some public rooms where I was to ask for the Count, and beg him to come to my father. I found him, and recognised him as a gentleman whom I had seen the other night for the first time behind the scenes. That agitated me, for I remembered his way of looking at me and kissing my hand – I thought it was in mockery. But I delivered my errand and he promised to go immediately to my father, who came home again that very evening, bringing the Count with him. I now began to feel a horrible dread of this man, for he worried me with his attentions, his eyes were always on me: I felt sure that whatever else there might be in his mind towards me, below it all there was scorn for the Jewess and the actress. And when he came to me the next day in the theatre and

would put my shawl round me, a terror took hold of me; I saw that my father wanted me to look pleased. The Count was neither very young nor very old: his hair and eyes were pale; he was tall and walked heavily, and his face was heavy and grave except when he looked at me. He smiled at me, and his smile went through me with horror: I could not tell why he was so much worse to me than other men. Some feelings are like our hearing: they come as sounds do, before we know their reason. My father talked to me about him when we were alone, and praised him – said what a good friend he had been. I said nothing, because I supposed he had got my father out of prison. When the Count came again, my father left the room. He asked me if I liked being on the stage. I said No, I only acted in obedience to my father. He always spoke French, and called me "petit ange" and such things, which I felt insulting. I knew he meant to make love to me, and I had it firmly in my mind that a nobleman and one who was not a Jew could have no love for me that was not half contempt. But then he told me that I need not act any longer; he wished me to visit him at his beautiful place, where I might be queen of everything. It was difficult to me to speak, I felt so shaken with anger: I could only say, "I would rather stay on the stage for ever," and I left him there. Hurrying out of the room I saw my father sauntering in the passage. My heart was crushed. I went past him and locked myself up. It had sunk into me that my father was in a conspiracy with that man against me. But the next day he persuaded me to come out: he said that I had mistaken everything, and he would explain: if I did not come out and act and fulfil my engagement, we should be ruined and he must starve. So I went on acting, and for a week or more the Count never came near me. My father changed our lodgings, and kept at home except when he went to the theatre with me. He began one day to speak discouragingly of my acting, and say, I could never go on singing in public – I should lose my voice – I ought to think of my future, and not put my nonsensical feelings between me and my fortune. He said, "What will you do? You will be brought down to sing and beg at people's doors. You have had a splendid offer and ought to accept it." I could not speak: a horror took possession of me when I thought of my mother and of him. I felt for the first time that I should not do wrong to leave him. But the next day he told me that he had put an end to my engagement at the theatre, and that we were to go to Prague. I was getting suspicious of everything, and my will was hardening to act against him. It took us two days to pack and get ready; and I had it in my mind that I might be obliged to run away from my father, and then I would come to London and try if it were possible to find my mother. I had a little money, and I sold some things to get more. I packed a few clothes in a little bag that I could carry with me, and I kept my mind on the watch. My father's silence – his letting drop that subject of the Count's offer – made me feel sure that there was a plan against me. I felt as if it had been a plan to take me to a madhouse. I once saw a picture of a madhouse, that I could never forget; it seemed to me very much like some of the life I had seen – the people strutting, quarrelling, leering – the faces with cunning and malice in them. It was my will to keep myself from wickedness; and I prayed for help. I had seen what despised women were: and my heart turned against my father, for I saw always behind him that man who made me shudder. You will think I had not enough reason for my suspicions, and perhaps I had not, outside my own feeling; but it seemed to me that my mind had been lit up, and all that might be stood out clear and sharp. If I slept, it was only to see the same sort of things, and I could hardly sleep at all. Through our journey I was everywhere on the watch. I don't know why, but it came before me like a real event, that my father would suddenly leave me and I should find myself with the Count where I could not get away from him. I thought God was warning me: my mother's voice was in my soul. It was dark when we reached Prague, and though the strange bunches of lamps were lit it was difficult to distinguish faces as we drove along the street. My father chose to sit outside – he was always smoking now – and I watched everything in spite of the darkness. I do believe I could see better then than ever I did before: the strange clearness within seemed to have got outside me. It was not my habit to notice faces and figures much in the street; but this night I saw every one; and when we passed before a great hotel I caught sight only of a back that was passing in – the light of the great bunch of lamps a good way off fell on it. I knew it – before the face was turned, as it fell into shadow, I knew who it was. Help came to me. I feel sure help came to me. I did not sleep that night. I put on my plainest things – the cloak and hat I have worn ever since; and I sat watching for the light and the sound of the doors being unbarred. Some one rose early – at four o'clock, to go to the railway. That gave me courage. I slipped out with my little bag under my cloak, and none noticed me. I had been a long while attending to the railway guide that I might learn the way to England; and before the sun had risen I was in the train for Dresden. Then I cried for joy. I did not know whether my money would last out, but I trusted. I could sell the things in my bag, and the little rings in my ears, and I could live on bread only. My only terror was lest my father should follow me. But I never paused. I came on, and on, and on, only eating bread now and then. When I got to Brussels I saw that I should not have enough money, and I sold all that I could sell; but here a strange thing happened. Putting my hand into the pocket of my cloak, I found a half-napoleon. Wondering and wondering how it came there, I remembered that on the way from Cologne there was a young workman sitting against me. I was frightened at every one, and did not like to be spoken to. At first he tried to talk, but when he saw that I did not like it, he left off. It was a long journey; I

ate nothing but a bit of bread, and he once offered me some of the food he brought in, but I refused it. I do believe it was he who put that bit of gold in my pocket. Without it I could hardly have got to Dover, and I did walk a good deal of the way from Dover to London. I knew I should look like a miserable beggar-girl. I wanted not to look very miserable, because if I found my mother it would grieve her to see me so. But oh, how vain my hope was that she would be there to see me come! As soon as I set foot in London, I began to ask for Lambeth and Blackfriars Bridge, but they were a long way off, and I went wrong. At last I got to Blackfriars Bridge and asked for Colman Street. People shook their heads. None knew it. I saw it in my mind – our doorsteps, and the white tiles hung in the windows, and the large brick building opposite with wide doors. But there was nothing like it. At last when I asked a tradesman where the Coburg Theatre and Colman Street were, he said, "Oh, my little woman, that's all done away with. The old streets have been pulled down; everything is new." I turned away, and felt as if death had laid a hand on me. He said: "Stop, stop! young woman; what is it you're wanting with Colman Street, eh?" meaning well, perhaps. But his tone was what I could not bear; and how could I tell him what I wanted? I felt blinded and bewildered with a sudden shock. I suddenly felt that I was very weak and weary, and yet where could I go? for I looked so poor and dusty, and had nothing with me – I looked like a street-beggar. And I was afraid of all places where I could enter. I lost my trust. I thought I was forsaken. It seemed that I had been in a fever of hope – delirious – all the way from Prague: I thought that I was helped, and I did nothing but strain my mind forward and think of finding my mother; and now – there I stood in a strange world. All who saw me would think ill of me, and I must herd with beggars. I stood on the bridge and looked along the river. People were going on to a steamboat. Many of them seemed poor, and I felt as if it would be a refuge to get away from the streets: perhaps the boat would take me where I could soon get into a solitude. I had still some pence left, and I bought a loaf when I went on the boat. I wanted to have a little time and strength to think of life and death. How could I live? And now again it seemed that if ever I were to find my mother again, death was the way to her. I ate, that I might have strength to think. The boat set me down at a place along the river – I don't know where – and it was late in the evening. I found some large trees apart from the road, and I sat down under them that I might rest through the night. Sleep must have soon come to me, and when I awoke it was morning. The birds were singing, the dew was white about me, I felt chill and oh so lonely! I got up and walked and followed the river a long way and then turned back again. There was no reason why I should go anywhere. The world about me seemed like a vision that was hurrying by while I stood still with my pain. My thoughts were stronger than I was: they rushed in and forced me to see all my life from the beginning; ever since I was carried away from my mother I had felt myself a lost child taken up and used by strangers, who did not care what my life was to me, but only what I could do for them. It seemed all a weary wandering and heart-loneliness – as if I had been forced to go to merry-makings without the expectation of joy. And now it was worse. I was lost again, and I dreaded lest any stranger should notice me and speak to me. I had a terror of the world. None knew me; all would mistake me. I had seen so many in my life who made themselves glad with scorning, and laughed at another's shame. What could I do? This life seemed to be closing in upon me with a wall of fire – everywhere there was scorching that made me shrink. The high sunlight made me shrink. And I began to think that my despair was the voice of God telling me to die. But it would take me long to die of hunger. Then I thought of my People, how they had been driven from land to land and been afflicted, and multitudes had died of misery in their wandering – was I the first? And in the wars and troubles when Christians were cruelest, our fathers had sometimes slain their children and afterwards themselves; it was to save them from being false apostates. That seemed to make it right for me to put an end to my life; for calamity had closed me in too, and I saw no pathway but to evil. But my mind got into war with itself, for there were contrary things in it. I knew that some had held it wrong to hasten their own death, though they were in the midst of flames; and while I had some strength left it was a longing to bear if I ought to bear – else where was the good of all my life? It had not been happy since the first years: when the light came every morning I used to think, "I will bear it." But always before I had some hope; now it was gone. With these thoughts I wandered and wandered, inwardly crying to the Most High, from whom I should not flee in death more than in life – though I had no strong faith that He cared for me. The strength seemed departing from my soul: deep below all my cries was the feeling that I was alone and forsaken. The more I thought the wearier I got, till it seemed I was not thinking at all, but only the sky and the river and the Eternal God were in my soul. And what was it whether I died or lived? If I lay down to die in the river, was it more than lying down to sleep? – for there too I committed my soul – I gave myself up. I could not hear memories any more: I could only feel what was present in me – it was all one longing to cease from my weary life, which seemed only a pain outside the great peace that I might enter into. That was how it was. When the evening came and the sun was gone, it seemed as if that was all I had to wait for. And a new strength came into me to will what I would do. You know what I did. I was going to die. You know what happened – did he not tell you? Faith came to me again: I was not forsaken. He told you how he found me?'

Mrs Meyrick gave no audible answer, but pressed her lips against Mirah's forehead.

'She's just a pearl: the mud has only washed her,' was the fervid little woman's closing commentary when, *tête-à-tête* with Deronda in the back parlour that evening, she had conveyed Mirah's story to him with much vividness.

'What is your feeling about a search for this mother?' said Deronda. 'Have you no fears? I have, I confess.'

'Oh, I believe the mother's good,' said Mrs Meyrick, with rapid decisiveness; 'or *was* good. She may be dead – that's my fear. A good woman, you may depend: you may know it by the scoundrel the father is. Where did the child get her goodness from? Wheaten flour has to be accounted for.'

Deronda was rather disappointed at this answer: he had wanted a confirmation of his own judgment, and he began to put in demurrers. The argument about the mother would not apply to the brother, and Mrs Meyrick admitted that the brother might be an ugly likeness of the father. Then, as to advertising, if the name was Cohen, you might as well advertise for two undescribed terriers: and here Mrs Meyrick helped him, for the idea of an advertisement, already mentioned to Mirah, had roused the poor child's terror: she was convinced that her father would see it – he saw everything in the papers. Certainly there were safer means than advertising: men might be set to work whose business it was to find missing persons; but Deronda wished Mrs Meyrick to feel with him that it would be wiser to wait, before seeking a dubious – perhaps a deplorable result; especially as he was engaged to go abroad the next week for a couple of months. If a search were made, he would like to be at hand, so that Mrs Meyrick might not be unaided in meeting any consequences – supposing that she would generously continue to watch over Mirah.

'We should be very jealous of any one who took the task from us,' said Mrs Meyrick. 'She will stay under my roof: there is Hans's old room for her.'

'Will she be content to wait?' said Deronda, anxiously.

'No trouble there. It is not her nature to run into planning and devising: only to submit. See how she submitted to that father! It was a wonder to herself how she found the will and contrivance to run away from him. About finding her mother, her only notion now is to trust: since you were sent to save her and we are good to her, she trusts that her mother will be found in the same unsought way. And when she is talking I catch her feeling like a child.'

Mrs Meyrick hoped that the sum Deronda put into her hands as a provision for Mirah's wants was more than would be needed: after a little while Mirah would perhaps like to occupy herself as the other girls did, and make herself independent. Deronda pleaded that she must need a long rest.

'Oh yes; we will hurry nothing,' said Mrs Meyrick. 'Rely upon it, she shall be taken tender care of. If you like to give me your address abroad, I will write to let you know how we get on. It is not fair that we should have all the pleasure of her salvation to ourselves. And besides, I want to make believe that I am doing something for you as well as for Mirah.'

'That is no make-believe. What should I have done without you last night? Everything would have gone wrong. I shall tell Hans that the best of having him for a friend is, knowing his mother.'

After that they joined the girls in the other room, where Mirah was seated placidly, while the others were telling her what they knew about Mr Deronda – his goodness to Hans, and all the virtues that Hans had reported of him.

'Kate burns a pastille before his portrait every day,' said Mab. 'And I carry his signature in a little black-silk bag round my neck to keep off the cramp. And Amy says the multiplication-table in his name. We must all do something extra in honour of him, now he has brought you to us.'

'I suppose he is too great a person to want anything,' said Mirah, smiling at Mab, and appealing to the graver Amy. 'He is perhaps very high in the world?'

'He is very much above us in rank,' said Amy. 'He is related to grand people. I daresay he leans on some of the satin cushions we prick our fingers over.'

'I am glad he is of high rank,' said Mirah, with her usual quietness.

'Now, why are you glad of that?' said Amy, rather suspicious of this sentiment, and on the watch for Jewish peculiarities which had not appeared.

'Because I have always disliked men of high rank before.'

'Oh, Mr Deronda is not so very high,' said Kate. 'He need not hinder us from thinking ill of the whole peerage and baronetage if we like.'

When he entered, Mirah rose with the same look of grateful reverence that she had lifted to him the evening before: impossible to see a creature freer at once from embarrassment and boldness. Her theatrical training had left no recognisable trace; probably her manners had not much changed since she played the forsaken child at nine years of age; and she had grown up in her simplicity and truthfulness like a little flower-seed that absorbs the chance confusion of its surroundings into its own definite mould of beauty. Deronda felt that he

was making acquaintance with something quite new to him in the form of womanhood. For Mirah was not childlike from ignorance: her experience of evil and trouble was deeper and stranger than his own. He felt inclined to watch her and listen to her as if she had come from a far-off shore inhabited by a race different from our own.

But for that very reason he made his visit brief with his usual activity of imagination as to how his conduct might affect others, he shrank from what might seem like curiosity, or the assumption of a right to know as much as he pleased of one to whom he had done a service. For example, he would have liked to hear her sing, but he would have felt the expression of such a wish to be a rudeness in him – since she could not refuse, and he would all the while have a sense that she was being treated like one whose accomplishments were to be ready on demand. And whatever reverence could be shown to woman, he was bent on showing to this girl. Why? He gave himself several good reasons; but whatever one does with a strong unhesitating outflow of will, has a store of motive that it would be hard to put into words. Some deeds seem little more than interjections which give vent to the long passion of a life.

So Deronda soon took his farewell for the two months during which he expected to be absent from London, and in a few days he was on his way with Sir Hugo and Lady Mallinger to Leubronn.

He had fulfilled his intention of telling them about Mirah. The baronet was decidedly of opinion that the search for the mother and brother had better be let alone. Lady Mallinger was much interested in the poor girl, observing that there was a Society for the Conversion of the Jews, and that it was to be hoped Mirah would embrace Christianity; but perceiving that Sir Hugo looked at her with amusement, she concluded that she had said something foolish. Lady Mallinger felt apologetically about herself as a woman who had produced nothing but daughters in a case where sons were required, and hence regarded the apparent contradictions of the world as probably due to the weakness of her own understanding. But when she was much puzzled, it was her habit to say to herself, ‘I will ask Daniel.’ Deronda was altogether a convenience in the family; and Sir Hugo too, after intending to do the best for him, had begun to feel that the pleasantest result would be to have this substitute for a son always ready at his elbow.

This was the history of Deronda, so far as he knew it, up to the time of that visit to Leubronn in which he saw Gwendolen Harleth at the gaming-table.

Chapter Twenty-One

> It is a common sentence that Knowledge is power, but who hath duly considered or set forth the power of Ignorance? Knowledge slowly builds up what Ignorance in an hour pulls down. Knowledge, through patient and frugal centuries, enlarges discovery and makes record of it; Ignorance, wanting its day's dinner, lights a fire with the record, and gives a flavour to its one roast with the burnt souls of many generations. Knowledge, instructing the sense, refining and multiplying needs, transforms itself into skill and makes life various with a new six days' work; comes Ignorance drunk on the seventh, with a firkin of oil and a match and an easy 'Let there not be' – and the many-coloured creation is shrivelled up in blackness. Of a truth, Knowledge is power, but it is a power reined by scruple, having a conscience of what must be and what may be; whereas Ignorance is a blind giant who, let him but wax unbound, would make it a sport to seize the pillars that hold up the long-wrought fabric of human good, and turn all the places of joy dark as a buried Babylon. And looking at life parcel-wise, in the growth of a single lot, who having a practised vision may not see that ignorance of the true bond between events, and false conceit of means whereby sequences may be compelled – like that falsity of eyesight which overlooks the gradations of distance, seeing that which is afar off as if it were within a step or a grasp – precipitates the mistaken soul on destruction?

It was half-past ten in the morning when Gwendolen Harleth, after her gloomy journey from Leubronn, arrived at the station from which she must drive to Offendene. No carriage or friend was awaiting her, for in the telegram she had sent from Dover she had mentioned a later train, and in her impatience of lingering at a London station she had set off without picturing what it would be to arrive unannounced at half an hour's drive from home – at one of those stations which have been fixed on not as near anywhere but as equidistant from everywhere. Deposited as a *feme sole* with her large trunks, and having to wait while a vehicle was being got from the large-sized lantern called the Railway Inn, Gwendolen felt that the dirty paint in the waiting-room, the dusty decanter of flat water, and the texts in large letters calling on her to repent and be converted, were part of the dreary prospect opened by her family troubles; and she hurried away to the outer door looking towards the lane and fields. But here the very gleams of sunshine seemed melancholy, for the autumnal leaves and grass were shivering, and the wind was turning up the feathers of a cock and two croaking hens which had doubtless parted with their grown-up offspring and did not know what to do with themselves. The railway official also seemed without resources, and his innocent demeanour in observing Gwendolen and her trunks was rendered intolerable by the cast in his eye; especially since, being a new man, he did not know her, and must conclude that she was not very high in the world. The vehicle – a dirty old barouche – was within sight, and was being slowly prepared by an elderly labourer. Contemptible details these, to make part of a history; yet the turn of most lives is hardly to be accounted for without them. They are continually entering with cumulative force into a mood until it gets the mass and momentum of a theory or a motive. Even philosophy is not quite free from such determining influences; and to be dropt solitary at an ugly irrelevant-looking spot with a sense of no income on the mind, might well prompt a man to discouraging speculation on the origin of things and the reason of a world where a subtle thinker found himself so badly off. How much more might such trifles tell on a young lady equipped for society with a fastidious taste, an Indian shawl over her arm, some twenty cubic feet of trunks by her side, and a mortal dislike to the new consciousness of poverty which was stimulating her imagination of disagreeables? At any rate they told heavily on poor Gwendolen, and helped to quell her resistant spirit. What was the good of living in the midst of hardships, ugliness, and humiliation? This was the beginning of being at home again, and it was a sample of what she had to expect.

Here was the theme on which her discontent rung its sad changes during her slow drive in the uneasy barouche, with one great trunk squeezing the meek driver, and the other fastened with a rope on the seat in front of her. Her ruling vision all the way from Leubronn had been that the family would go abroad again; for of course there must be some little income left – her mamma did not mean that they would have literally nothing. To go to a dull place abroad and live poorly, was the dismal future that threatened her: she had seen plenty of poor English people abroad, and imagined herself plunged in the despised dulness of their ill-plenished lives, with Alice, Bertha, Fanny, and Isabel all growing up in tediousness around her, while she advanced towards thirty, and her mamma got more and more melancholy. But she did not mean to submit, and let misfortune do what it would with her: she had not yet quite believed in the misfortune; but weariness, and disgust with this wretched arrival, had begun to affect her like an uncomfortable waking, worse than the uneasy dreams which had gone before. The self-delight with which she had kissed her image in the glass had faded before the sense of futility in being anything whatever – charming, clever, resolute – what was the good

of it all? Events might turn out anyhow, and men were hateful. Yes, men were hateful. Those few words were filled out with very vivid memories. But in these last hours, a certain change had come over their meaning. It is one thing to hate stolen goods, and another thing to hate them the more because their being stolen hinders us from making use of them. Gwendolen had begun to be angry with Grandcourt for being what had hindered her from marrying him, angry with him as the cause of her present dreary lot.

But the slow drive was nearly at an end, and the lumbering vehicle coming up the avenue was within sight of the windows. A figure appearing under the portico brought a rush of new and less selfish feeling in Gwendolen, and when springing from the carriage she saw the dear beautiful face with fresh lines of sadness in it, she threw her arms round her mother's neck, and for the moment felt all sorrows only in relation to her mother's feeling about them.

Behind, of course, were the sad faces of the four superfluous girls, each, poor thing – like those other many thousand sisters of us all – having her peculiar world which was of no importance to any one else, but all of them feeling Gwendolen's presence to be somehow a relenting of misfortune: where Gwendolen was, something interesting would happen; even her hurried submission to their kisses, and 'Now go away, girls,' carried the sort of comfort which all weakness finds in decision and authoritativeness. Good Miss Merry, whose air of meek depression, hitherto held unaccountable in a governess affectionately attached to the family, was now at the general level of circumstances, did not expect any greeting, but busied herself with the trunks and the coachman's pay; while Mrs Davilow and Gwendolen hastened up-stairs and shut themselves in the black and yellow bedroom.

'Never mind, mamma dear,' said Gwendolen, tenderly pressing her handkerchief against the tears that were rolling down Mrs Davilow's cheeks. 'Never mind. I don't mind. I will do something. I will be something. Things will come right. It seemed worse because I was away. Come now! you must be glad because I am here.'

Gwendolen felt every word of that speech. A rush of compassionate tenderness stirred all her capability of generous resolution; and the self-confident projects which had vaguely glanced before her during her journey sprang instantaneously into new definiteness. Suddenly she seemed to perceive how she could be 'something.' It was one of her best moments, and the fond mother, forgetting everything below that tide-mark, looked at her with a sort of adoration. She said –

'Bless you, my good, good darling! I can be happy, if you can!'

But later in the day there was an ebb; the old slippery rocks, the old weedy places reappeared. Naturally, there was a shrinking of courage as misfortune ceased to be a mere announcement, and began to disclose itself as a grievous tyrannical inmate. At first – that ugly drive at an end – it was still Offendene that Gwendolen had come home to, and all surroundings of immediate consequence to her were still there to secure her personal ease; the roomy stillness of the large solid house while she rested; all the luxuries of her toilet cared for without trouble to her; and a little tray with her favourite food brought to her in private. For she had said, 'Keep them all away from us to-day, mamma. Let you and me be alone together.'

When Gwendolen came down into the drawing-room, fresh as a newly-dipped swan, and sat leaning against the cushions of the settee beside her mamma, their misfortune had not yet turned its face and breath upon her. She felt prepared to hear everything, and began in a tone of deliberate intention –

'What have you thought of doing exactly, mamma?'

'Oh my dear, the next thing to be done is to move away from this house. Mr Haynes most fortunately is as glad to have it now as he would have been when we took it. Lord Brackenshaw's agent is to arrange everything with him to the best advantage for us: Bazley, you know; not at all an ill-natured man.'

'I cannot help thinking that Lord Brackenshaw would let you stay here rent-free, mamma,' said Gwendolen, whose talents had not been applied to business so much as to discernment of the admiration excited by her charms.

'My dear child, Lord Brackenshaw is in Scotland, and knows nothing about us. Neither your uncle nor I would choose to apply to him. Besides, what could we do in this house without servants, and without money to warm it? The sooner we are out the better. We have nothing to carry but our clothes, you know?'

'I suppose you mean to go abroad, then?' said Gwendolen. After all, this is what she had familiarised her mind with.

'Oh no, dear, no. How could we travel? You never did learn anything about income and expenses,' said Mrs Davilow, trying to smile, and putting her hand on Gwendolen's as she added, mournfully, 'that makes it so much harder for you, my pet.'

'But where are we to go?' said Gwendolen, with a trace of sharpness in her tone. She felt a new current of fear passing through her.

'It is all decided. A little furniture is to be got in from the rectory – all that can be spared.' Mrs Davilow hesitated. She dreaded the reality for herself less than the shock she must give Gwendolen, who looked at her with tense expectancy, but was silent.

‘It is Sawyer’s Cottage we are to go to.’

At first, Gwendolen remained silent, paling with anger – justifiable anger, in her opinion. Then she said with haughtiness –

‘That is impossible. Something else than that ought to have been thought of. My uncle ought not to allow that. I will not submit to it.’

‘My sweet child, what else could have been thought of? Your uncle, I am sure, is as kind as he can be; but he is suffering himself: he has his family to bring up. And do you quite understand? You must remember – we have nothing. We shall have absolutely nothing except what he and my sister give us. They have been as wise and active as possible, and we must try to earn something. I and the girls are going to work a table-cloth border for the Ladies’ Charity at Wanchester, and a communion cloth that the parishioners are to present to Pennicote Church.’

Mrs Davilow went into these details timidly; but how else was she to bring the fact of their position home to this poor child who, alas! must submit at present, whatever might be in the background for her? and she herself had a superstition that there must be something better in the background.

‘But surely somewhere else than Sawyer’s Cottage might have been found,’ Gwendolen persisted – taken hold of (as if in a nightmare) by the image of this house where an exciseman had lived.

‘No, indeed, dear. You know houses are scarce, and we may be thankful to get anything so private. It is not so very bad. There are two little parlours and four bedrooms. You shall sit alone whenever you like.’

The ebb of sympathetic care for her mamma had gone so low just now, that Gwendolen took no notice of these deprecatory words.

‘I cannot conceive that all your property is gone at once, mamma. How can you be sure in so short a time? It is not a week since you wrote to me.’

‘The first news came much earlier, dear. But I would not spoil your pleasure till it was quite necessary.’

‘Oh how vexatious!’ said Gwendolen, colouring with fresh anger. ‘If I had known, I could have brought home the money I had won; and for want of knowing, I stayed and lost it. I had nearly two hundred pounds, and it would have done for us to live on a little while, till I could carry out some plan.’ She paused an instant and then added more impetuously, ‘Everything has gone against me. People have come near me only to blight me.’

Among the ‘people’ she was including Deronda. If he had not interfered in her life she would have gone to the gaming-table again with a few napoleons, and might have won back her losses.

‘We must resign ourselves to the will of Providence, my child,’ said poor Mrs Davilow, startled by this revelation of the gambling, but not daring to say more. She felt sure that ‘people’ meant Grandcourt, about whom her lips were sealed. And Gwendolen answered immediately –

‘But I don’t resign myself. I shall do what I can against it. What is the good of calling people’s wickedness Providence? You said in your letter it was Mr Lassmann’s fault we had lost our money. Has he run away with it all?’

‘No, dear, you don’t understand. There were great speculations: he meant to gain. It was all about mines and things of that sort. He risked too much.’

‘I don’t call that Providence: it was his improvidence with our money, and he ought to be punished. Can’t we go to law and recover our fortune? My uncle ought to take measures, and not sit down by such wrongs. We ought to go to law.’

‘My dear child, law can never bring back money lost in that way. Your uncle says it is milk spilt upon the ground. Besides, one must have a fortune to get any law: there is no law for people who are ruined. And our money has only gone along with other people’s. We are not the only sufferers: others have to resign themselves besides us.’

‘But I don’t resign myself to live at Sawyer’s Cottage and see you working for sixpences and shillings because of that. I shall not do it. I shall do what is more befitting our rank and education.’

‘I am sure your uncle and all of us will approve of that, dear, and admire you the more for it,’ said Mrs Davilow, glad of an unexpected opening for speaking on a difficult subject. ‘I didn’t mean that you should resign yourself to worse when anything better offered itself. Both your uncle and aunt have felt that your abilities and education were a fortune for you, and they have already heard of something within your reach.’

‘What is that, mamma?’ Some of Gwendolen’s anger gave way to interest, and she was not without romantic conjectures.

‘There are two situations that offer themselves. One is in a bishop’s family, where there are three daughters, and the other is in quite a high class of school; and in both, your French, and music, and dancing – and then your manners and habits as a lady, are exactly what is wanted. Each is a hundred a-year – and – just for the present,’ – Mrs Davilow had become frightened and hesitating, – ‘to save you from the petty, common way of living that we must go to – you would perhaps accept one of the two.’

‘What! be like Miss Graves at Madame Meunier’s? No.’

‘I think, myself, that Dr Mompert’s would be more suitable. There could be no hardship in a bishop’s family.’

‘Excuse me, mamma. There are hardships everywhere for a governess. And I don’t see that it would be pleasanter to be looked down on in a bishop’s family than in any other. Besides, you know very well I hate teaching. Fancy me shut up with three awkward girls something like Alice! I would rather emigrate than be a governess.’

What it precisely was to emigrate, Gwendolen was not called on to explain. Mrs Davilow was mute, seeing no outlet, and thinking with dread of the collision that might happen when Gwendolen had to meet her uncle and aunt. There was an air of reticence in Gwendolen’s haughty resistant speeches, which implied that she had a definite plan in reserve; and her practical ignorance, continually exhibited, could not nullify the mother’s belief in the effectiveness of that forcible will and daring which had held the mastery over herself.

‘I have some ornaments, mamma, and I could sell them,’ said Gwendolen. ‘They would make a sum: I want a little sum – just to go on with. I daresay Marshall at Wanchester would take them: I know he showed me some bracelets once that he said he had bought from a lady. Jocosa might go and ask him. Jocosa is going to leave us, of course. But she might do that first.’

‘She would do anything she could, poor dear soul. I have not told you yet – she wanted me to take all her savings – her three hundred pounds. I tell her to set up a little school. It will be hard for her to go into a new family now she has been so long with us.’

‘Oh, recommend her for the bishop’s daughters,’ said Gwendolen, with a sudden gleam of laughter in her face. ‘I am sure she will do better than I should.’

‘Do take care not to say such things to your uncle,’ said Mrs Davilow. ‘He will be hurt at your despising what he has exerted himself about. But I daresay you have something else in your mind that he might not disapprove, if you consulted him.’

‘There is some one else I want to consult first. Are the Arrowpoints at Quetcham still, and is Herr Klesmer there? But I daresay you know nothing about it, poor dear mamma. Can Jeffries go on horseback with a note?’

‘Oh, my dear, Jeffries is not here, and the dealer has taken the horses. But some one could go for us from Leek’s farm. The Arrowpoints are at Quetcham, I know. Miss Arrowpoint left her card the other day: I could not see her. But I don’t know about Herr Klesmer. Do you want to send before to-morrow?’

‘Yes, as soon as possible. I will write a note,’ said Gwendolen, rising.

‘What can you be thinking of, Gwen?’ said Mrs Davilow, relieved in the midst of her wonderment by signs of alacrity and better humour.

‘Don’t mind what, there’s a dear good mamma,’ said Gwendolen, reseating herself a moment to give atoning caresses. ‘I mean to do something. Never mind what, until it is all settled. And then you shall be comforted. The dear face! – it is ten years older in these three weeks. Now, now, now! – don’t cry’ – Gwendolen, holding her mamma’s head with both hands, kissed the trembling eyelids. ‘But mind you don’t contradict me or put hindrances in my way. I must decide for myself. I cannot be dictated to by my uncle or any one else. My life is my own affair. And I think’ – here her tone took an edge of scorn – ‘I think I can do better for you than let you live in Sawyer’s Cottage.’

In uttering this last sentence Gwendolen again rose, and went to a desk where she wrote the following note to Klesmer: –

> ‘Miss Harleth presents her compliments to Herr Klesmer and ventures to request of him the very great favour that he will call upon her, if possible to-morrow. Her reason for presuming so far on his kindness is of a very serious nature. Unfortunate family circumstances have obliged her to take a course in which she can only turn for advice to the great knowledge and judgment of Herr Klesmer.’

‘Pray get this sent to Quetcham at once, mamma,’ said Gwendolen, as she addressed the letter. ‘The man must be told to wait for an answer. Let no time be lost.’

For the moment, the absorbing purpose was to get the letter despatched; but when she had been assured on this point, another anxiety arose and kept her in a state of uneasy excitement. If Klesmer happened not to be at Quetcham, what could she do next? Gwendolen’s belief in her star, so to speak, had had some bruises. Things had gone against her. A splendid marriage which presented itself within reach had shown a hideous flaw. The chances of roulette had not adjusted themselves to her claims; and a man of whom she knew nothing had thrust himself between her and her intentions. The conduct of those uninteresting people who managed the business of the world had been culpable just in the points most injurious to her in particular. Gwendolen Harleth, with all her beauty and conscious force, felt the close threats of humiliation: for the first time the conditions of this world seemed to her like a hurrying roaring crowd in which she had got astray, no more cared for and protected than a myriad of other girls, in spite of its being a peculiar hardship to her. If Klesmer were not at Quetcham – that would be all of a piece with the rest the unwelcome negative urged itself as a probability, and set her brain working at desperate alternatives which might deliver her from

Sawyer's Cottage or the ultimate necessity of 'taking a situation,' a phrase that summed up for her the disagreeables most wounding to her pride, most irksome to her tastes; at least so far as her experience enabled her to imagine disagreeables.

Still Klesmer might be there, and Gwendolen thought of the result in that case with a hopefulness which even cast a satisfactory light over her peculiar troubles, as what might well enter into the biography of celebrities and remarkable persons. And if she had heard her immediate acquaintances cross-examined as to whether they thought her remarkable, the first who said 'No' would have surprised her.

Chapter Twenty-Two

> We please our fancy with ideal webs
> Of innovation, but our life meanwhile
> Is in the loom, where busy passion plies
> The shuttle to and fro, and gives our deeds
> The accustomed pattern.

Gwendolen's note, coming 'pat betwixt too early and too late,' was put into Klesmer's hands just when he was leaving Quetcham, and in order to meet her appeal to his kindness he with some inconvenience to himself spent the night at Wanchester. There were reasons why he would not remain at Quetcham.

That magnificent mansion, fitted with regard to the greatest expense, had in fact become too hot for him, its owners having, like some great politicians, been astonished at an insurrection against the established order of things, which we plain people after the event can perceive to have been prepared under their very noses.

There were as usual many guests in the house, and among them one in whom Miss Arrowpoint foresaw a new pretender to her hand: a political man of good family who confidently expected a peerage, and felt on public grounds that he required a larger fortune to support the title properly. Heiresses vary, and persons interested in one of them beforehand are prepared to find that she is too yellow or too red, tall and toppling or short and square, violent and capricious or moony and insipid; but in every case it is taken for granted that she will consider herself an appendage to her fortune, and marry where others think her fortune ought to go. Nature, however, not only accommodates herself ill to our favourite practices by making 'only children' daughters, but also now and then endows the misplaced daughter with a clear head and a strong will. The Arrowpoints had already felt some anxiety owing to these endowments of their Catherine. She would not accept the view of her social duty which required her to marry a needy nobleman or a commoner on the ladder towards nobility; and they were not without uneasiness concerning her persistence in declining suitable offers. As to the possibility of her being in love with Klesmer they were not at all uneasy – a very common sort of blindness. For in general mortals have a great power of being astonished at the presence of an effect towards which they have done everything, and at the absence of an effect towards which they have done nothing but desire it. Parents are astonished at the ignorance of their sons, though they have used the most time-honoured and expensive means of securing it; husbands and wives are mutually astonished at the loss of affection which they have taken no pains to keep; and all of us in our turn are apt to be astonished that our neighbours do not admire us. In this way it happens that the truth seems highly improbable. The truth is something different from the habitual lazy combinations begotten by our wishes. The Arrowpoints' hour of astonishment was come.

When there is a passion between an heiress and a proud independent-spirited man, it is difficult for them to come to an understanding; but the difficulties are likely to be overcome unless the proud man secures himself by a constant *alibi*. Brief meetings after studied absence are potent in disclosure: but more potent still in frequent companionship, with full sympathy in taste, and admirable qualities on both sides; especially where the one is in the position of teacher, and the other is delightedly conscious of receptive ability which also gives the teacher delight. The situation is famous in history, and has no less charm now than it had in the days of Abelard.

But this kind of comparison had not occurred to the Arrowpoints when they first engaged Klesmer to come down to Quetcham. To have a first-rate musician in your house is a privilege of wealth; Catherine's musical talent demanded every advantage; and she particularly desired to use her quieter time in the country for more thorough study. Klesmer was not yet a Liszt, understood to be adored by ladies of all European countries with the exception of Lapland: and even with that understanding it did not follow that he would make proposals to an heiress. No musician of honour would do so. Still less was it conceivable that Catherine would give him the slightest pretext for such daring. The large cheque that Mr Arrowpoint was to draw in Klesmer's name seemed to make him as safe an inmate as a footman. Where marriage is inconceivable, a girl's sentiments are safe.

Klesmer was eminently a man of honour, but marriages rarely begin with formal proposals, and moreover, Catherine's limit of the conceivable did not exactly correspond with her mother's.

Outsiders might have been more apt to think that Klesmer's position was dangerous for himself if Miss

Arrowpoint had been an acknowledged beauty; not taking into account that the most powerful of all beauty is that which reveals itself after sympathy and not before it. There is a charm of eye and lip which comes with every little phrase that certifies delicate perception or fine judgment, with every unostentatious word or smile that shows a heart awake to others; and no sweep of garment or turn of figure is more satisfying than that which enters as a restoration of confidence that one person is present on whom no intention will be lost. What dignity of meaning goes on gathering in frowns and laughs which are never observed in the wrong place; what suffused adorableness in a human frame where there is a mind that can flash out comprehension and hands that can execute finely! The more obvious beauty, also adorable sometimes – one may say it without blasphemy – begins by being an apology for folly, and ends like other apologies in becoming tiresome by iteration; and that Klesmer, though very susceptible to it, should have a passionate attachment to Miss Arrowpoint, was no more a paradox than any other triumph of a manifold sympathy over a monotonous attraction. We object less to be taxed with the enslaving excess of our passions than with our deficiency in wider passion; but if the truth were known, our reputed intensity is often the dulness of not knowing what else to do with ourselves. Tannhäuser, one suspects, was a knight of ill-furnished imagination, hardly of larger discourse than a heavy Guardsman; Merlin had certainly seen his best days, and was merely repeating himself, when he fell into that hopeless captivity; and we know that Ulysses felt so manifest an *ennui* under similar circumstances that Calypso herself furthered his departure. There is indeed a report that he afterwards left Penelope; but since she was habitually absorbed in worsted work, and it was probably from her that Telemachus got his mean, pettifogging disposition, always anxious about the property and the daily consumption of meat, no inference can be drawn from this already dubious scandal as to the relation between companionship and constancy.

Klesmer was as versatile and fascinating as a young Ulysses on a sufficient acquaintance – one whom nature seemed to have first made generously and then to have added music as a dominant power using all the abundant rest, and, as in Mendelssohn, finding expression for itself not only in the highest finish of execution, but in that fervour of creative work and theoretic belief which pierces the whole future of a life with the light of congruous, devoted purpose. His foibles of arrogance and vanity did not exceed such as may be found in the best English families; and Catherine Arrowpoint had no corresponding restlessness to class with his: notwithstanding her native kindliness she was perhaps too coolly firm and self-sustained. But she was one of those satisfactory creatures whose intercourse has the charm of discovery; whose integrity of faculty and expression begets a wish to know what they will say on all subjects or how they will perform whatever they undertake; so that they end by raising not only a continual expectation but a continual sense of fulfilment – the systole and diastole of blissful companionship. In such cases the outward presentment easily becomes what the image is to the worshipper. It was not long before the two became aware that each was interesting to the other; but the ‘how far’ remained a matter of doubt Klesmer did not conceive that Miss Arrowpoint was likely to think of him as a possible lover, and she was not accustomed to think of herself as likely to stir more than a friendly regard, or to fear the expression of more from any man who was not enamoured of her fortune. Each was content to suffer some unshared sense of denial for the sake of loving the other’s society a little too well; and under these conditions no need had been felt to restrict Klesmer’s visits for the last year either in country or in town. He knew very well that if Miss Arrowpoint had been poor he would have made ardent love to her instead of sending a storm through the piano, or folding his arms and pouring out a hyperbolical tirade about something as impersonal as the north pole; and she was not less aware that if it had been possible for Klesmer to wish for her hand she would have found overmastering reasons for giving it to him. Here was the safety of full cups, which are as secure from overflow as the half-empty, always supposing no disturbance. Naturally, silent feeling had not remained at the same point any more than the stealthy dial-hand, and in the present visit to Quetcham, Klesmer had begun to think that he would not come again; while Catherine was more sensitive to his frequent *brusquerie*, which she rather resented as a needless effort to assert his footing of superior in every sense except the conventional.

Meanwhile enters the expectant peer, Mr Bult, an esteemed party man who, rather neutral in private life, had strong opinions concerning the districts of the Niger, was much at home also in the Brazils, spoke with decision of affairs in the South Seas, was studious of his Parliamentary and itinerant speeches, and had the general solidity and suffusive pinkness of a healthy Briton on the central table-land of life. Catherine, aware of a tacit understanding that he was an undeniable husband for an heiress, had nothing to say against him but that he was thoroughly tiresome to her. Mr Bult was amiably confident, and had no idea that his insensibility to counterpoint could ever be reckoned against him. Klesmer he hardly regarded in the light of a serious human being who ought to have a vote; and he did not mind Miss Arrowpoint’s addiction to music any more than her probable expenses in antique lace. He was consequently a little amazed at an after-dinner outburst of Klesmer’s on the lack of idealism in English politics, which left all mutuality between distant races to be determined simply by the need of a market: the crusades, to his mind, had at least this excuse, that they had a

banner of sentiment round which generous feelings could rally: of course, the scoundrels rallied too, but what then? they rally in equal force round your advertisement van of 'Buy cheap, sell dear.' On this theme Klesmer's eloquence, gesticulatory and other, went on for a little while like stray fireworks accidentally ignited, and then sank into immovable silence. Mr Bult was not surprised that Klesmer's opinions should be flighty, but was astonished at his command of English idiom and his ability to put a point in a way that would have told at a constituents' dinner – to be accounted for probably by his being a Pole, or a Czech, or something of that fermenting sort, in a state of political refugeeism which had obliged him to make a profession of his music; and that evening in the drawing-room he for the first time went up to Klesmer at the piano, Miss Arrowpoint being near, and said –

'I had no idea before that you were a political man.'

Klesmer's only answer was to fold his arms, put out his nether lip, and stare at Mr Bult.

'You must have been used to public speaking. You speak uncommonly well, though I don't agree with you. From what you said about sentiment, I fancy you are a Panslavist.'

'No; my name is Elijah. I am the Wandering Jew,' said Klesmer, flashing a smile at Miss Arrowpoint, and suddenly making a mysterious wind-like rush backwards and forwards on the piano. Mr Bult felt this buffoonery rather offensive and Polish, but – Miss Arrowpoint being there – did not like to move away.

'Herr Klesmer has cosmopolitan ideas,' said Miss Arrowpoint, trying to make the best of the situation. 'He looks forward to a fusion of races.'

'With all my heart,' said Mr Bult, willing to be gracious. 'I was sure he had too much talent to be a mere musician.'

'Ah, sir, you are under some mistake there,' said Klesmer, firing up. 'No man has too much talent to be a musician. Most men have too little. A creative artist is no more a mere musician than a great statesman is a mere politician. We are not ingenious puppets, sir, who live in a box and look out on the world only when it is gaping for amusement. We help to rule the nations and make the age as much as any other public men. We count ourselves on level benches with legislators. And a man who speaks effectively through music is compelled to something more difficult than parliamentary eloquence.'

With the last word Klesmer wheeled from the piano and walked away.

Miss Arrowpoint coloured, and Mr Bult observed with his usual phlegmatic stolidity, 'Your pianist does not think small beer of himself.'

'Herr Klesmer is something more than a pianist,' said Miss Arrowpoint, apologetically. 'He is a great musician in the fullest sense of the word. He will rank with Schubert and Mendelssohn.'

'Ah, you ladies understand these things,' said Mr Bult, none the less convinced that these things were frivolous because Klesmer had shown himself a coxcomb.

Catherine, always sorry when Klesmer gave himself airs, found an opportunity the next day in the music-room to say, 'Why were you so heated last night with Mr Bult? He meant no harm.'

'You wish me to be complaisant to him?' said Klesmer, rather fiercely.

'I think it is hardly worth your while to be other than civil.'

'You find no difficulty in tolerating him, then? – you have a respect for a political platitudinarian as insensible as an ox to everything he can't turn into political capital. You think his monumental obtuseness suited to the dignity of the English gentleman.'

'I did not say that.'

'You mean that I acted without dignity and you are offended with me.'

'Now you are slightly nearer the truth,' said Catherine, smiling.

'Then I had better put my burial-clothes in my portmanteau and set off at once.'

'I don't see that. If I have to bear your criticism of my operetta, you should not mind my criticism of your impatience.'

'But I do mind it. You would have wished me to take his ignorant impertinence about a "mere musician" without letting him know his place. I am to hear my gods blasphemed as well as myself insulted. But I beg pardon. It is impossible you should see the matter as I do. Even you can't understand the wrath of the artist: he is of another caste for you.'

'That is true,' said Catherine, with some betrayal of feeling. 'He is of a caste to which I look up – a caste above mine.'

Klesmer, who had been seated at a table looking over scores, started up and walked to a little distance, from which he said –

'That is finely felt – I am grateful. But I had better go, all the same. I have made up my mind to go, for good and all. You can get on exceedingly well without me: your operetta is on wheels – it will go of itself. And your Mr Bult's company fits me "wie die Faust ins Auge."[7] I am neglecting my engagements. I must go off to St Petersburg.'

There was no answer.

'You agree with me that I had better go?' said Klesmer, with some irritation.

'Certainly; if that is what your business and feeling prompt. I have only to wonder that you have consented to give us so much of your time in the last year. There must be treble the interest to you anywhere else. I have never thought of your consenting to come here as anything else than a sacrifice.'

'Why should I make the sacrifice?' said Klesmer, going to seat himself at the piano, and touching the keys so as to give with the delicacy of an echo in the far distance a melody which he had set to Heine's 'Ich hab' dich geliebet und liebe dich noch.'[8]

'That is the mystery,' said Catherine, not wanting to affect anything, but from mere agitation. From the same cause she was tearing a piece of paper into minute morsels, as if at a task of utmost multiplication imposed by a cruel fairy.

'You can conceive no motive?' said Klesmer folding his arms.

'None that seems in the least probable.'

'Then I shall tell you. It is because you are to me the chief woman in the world – the throned lady whose colours I carry between my heart and my armour.'

Catherine's hands trembled so much that she could no longer tear the paper: still less could her lips utter a word. Klesmer went on –

'This would be the last impertinence in me, if I meant to found anything upon it. That is out of the question. I mean no such thing. But you once said it was your doom to suspect every man who courted you of being an adventurer, and what made you angriest was men's imputing to you the folly of believing that they courted you for your own sake. Did you not say so?'

'Very likely,' was the answer, in a low murmur.

'It was a bitter word. Well, at least one man who has seen women as plenty as flowers in May has lingered about you for your own sake. And since he is one whom you can never marry, you will believe him. That is an argument in favour of some other man. But don't give yourself for a meal to a minotaur like Bult. I shall go now and pack. I shall make my excuses to Mrs Arrowpoint.' Klesmer rose as he ended, and walked quickly towards the door.

'You must take this heap of manuscript, then,' said Catherine, suddenly making a desperate effort. She had risen to fetch the heap from another table. Klesmer came back, and they had the length of the folio sheets between them.

'Why should I not marry the man who loves me, if I love him?' said Catherine. To her the effort was something like the leap of a woman from the deck into the lifeboat.

'It would be too hard – impossible – you could not carry it through. I am not worth what you would have to encounter. I will not accept the sacrifice. It would be thought a *mésalliance* for you, and I should be liable to the worst accusations.'

'Is it the accusations you are afraid of? I am afraid of nothing but that we should miss the passing of our lives together.'

The decisive word had been spoken: there was no doubt concerning the end willed by each: there only remained the way of arriving at it, and Catherine determined to take the straightest possible. She went to her father and mother in the library, and told them that she had promised to marry Klesmer.

Mrs Arrowpoint's state of mind was pitiable. Imagine Jean Jacques, after his essay on the corrupting influence of the arts, waking up among children of nature who had no idea of grilling the raw bone they offered him for breakfast with the primitive flint knife; or Saint Just, after fervidly denouncing all recognition of pre-eminence, receiving a vote of thanks for the unbroken mediocrity of his speech, which warranted the dullest patriots in delivering themselves at equal length. Something of the same sort befell the authoress of 'Tasso,' when what she had safely demanded of the dead Leonora was enacted by her own Catherine. It is hard for us to live up to our own eloquence, and keep pace with our winged words, while we are treading the solid earth and are liable to heavy dining. Besides, it has long been understood that the proprieties of literature are not those of practical life. Mrs Arrowpoint naturally wished for the best of everything. She not only liked to feel herself at a higher level of literary sentiment than the ladies with whom she associated; she wished not to be below them in any point of social consideration. While Klesmer was seen in the light of a patronised musician, his peculiarities were picturesque and acceptable; but to see him by a sudden flash in the light of her son-in-law gave her a burning sense of what the world would say. And the poor lady had been used to represent her Catherine as a model of excellence.

Under the first shock she forgot everything but her anger, and snatched at any phrase that would serve as a weapon.

'If Klesmer has presumed to offer himself to you, your father shall horsewhip him off the premises. Pray, speak, Mr Arrowpoint.'

The father took his cigar from his mouth, and rose to the occasion by saying, 'This will never do, Cath.'

'Do!' cried Mrs Arrowpoint; 'who in their senses ever thought it would do? You might as well say poisoning and strangling will not do. It is a comedy you have got up, Catherine. Else you are mad.'

'I am quite sane and serious, mamma, and Herr Klesmer is not to blame. He never thought of my marrying him. I found out that he loved me, and loving him, I told him I would marry him.'

'Leave that unsaid, Catherine,' said Mrs Arrowpoint, bitterly. 'Every one else will say it for you. You will be a public fable. Every one will say that you must have made the offer to a man who has been paid to come to the house – who is nobody knows what – a gypsy, a Jew, a mere bubble of the earth.'

'Never mind, mamma,' said Catherine, indignant in her turn. 'We all know he is a genius – as Tasso was.'

'Those times were not these, nor is Klesmer Tasso,' said Mrs Arrowpoint, getting more heated. 'There is no sting in *that* sarcasm, except the sting of undutifulness.'

'I am sorry to hurt you, mamma. But I will not give up the happiness of my life to ideas that I don't believe in and customs I have no respect for.'

'You have lost all sense of duty, then? You have forgotten that you are our only child – that it lies with you to place a great property in the right hands?'

'What are the right hands? My grandfather gained the property in trade.'

'Mr Arrowpoint, *will* you sit by and hear this without speaking?'

'I am a gentleman, Cath. We expect you to marry a gentleman,' said the father, exerting himself.

'And a man connected with the institutions of this country,' said the mother. 'A woman in your position has serious duties. Where duty and inclination clash, she must follow duty.'

'I don't deny that,' said Catherine, getting colder in proportion to her mother's heat. 'But one may say very true things and apply them falsely. People can easily take the sacred word duty as a name for what they desire any one else to do.'

'Your parents' desire makes no duty for you, then?'

'Yes, within reason. But before I give up the happiness of my life—'

'Catherine, Catherine, it will not be your happiness,' said Mrs Arrowpoint, in her most raven-like tones.

'Well, what seems to me my happiness – before I give it up, I must see some better reason than the wish that I should marry a nobleman, or a man who votes with a party that he may be turned into a nobleman. I feel at liberty to marry the man I love and think worthy, unless some higher duty forbids.'

'And so it does, Catherine, though you are blinded and cannot see it. It is a woman's duty not to lower herself. You are lowering yourself. Mr Arrowpoint, will you tell your daughter what is her duty?'

'You must see, Catherine, that Klesmer is not the man for you,' said Mr Arrowpoint. 'He won't do at the head of estates. He has a deuced foreign look – is an unpractical man.'

'I really can't see what that has to do with it, papa. The land of England has often passed into the hands of foreigners – Dutch soldiers, sons of foreign women of bad character: – if our land were sold to-morrow it would very likely pass into the hands of some foreign merchant on 'Change. It is in everybody's mouth that successful swindlers may buy up half the land in the country. How can I stem that tide?'

'It will never do to argue about marriage, Cath,' said Mr Arrowpoint. 'It's no use getting up the subject like a parliamentary question. We must do as other people do. We must think of the nation and the public good.'

'I can't see any public good concerned here, papa,' said Catherine. 'Why is it to be expected of an heiress that she should carry the property gained in trade into the hands of a certain class? That seems to me a ridiculous mish-mash of superannuated customs and false ambition. I should call it a public evil. People had better make a new sort of public good by changing their ambitions.'

'That is mere sophistry, Catherine,' said Mrs Arrowpoint. 'Because you don't wish to marry a nobleman, you are not obliged to marry a mountebank or a charlatan.'

'I cannot understand the application of such words, mamma.'

'No, I daresay not,' rejoined Mrs Arrowpoint, with significant scorn. 'You have got to a pitch at which we are not likely to understand each other.'

'It can't be done, Cath,' said Mr Arrowpoint, wishing to substitute a better-humoured reasoning for his wife's impetuosity. 'A man like Klesmer can't marry such a property as yours. It can't be done.'

'It certainly will not be done,' said Mrs Arrowpoint, imperiously. 'Where is the man? Let him be fetched.'

'I cannot fetch him to be insulted,' said Catherine. 'Nothing will be achieved by that.'

'I suppose you would wish him to know that in marrying you he will not marry your fortune,' said Mrs Arrowpoint.

'Certainly; if it were so, I should wish him to know it.'

'Then you had better fetch him.'

Catherine only went into the music-room and said, 'Come:' she felt no need to prepare Klesmer.

'Herr Klesmer,' said Mrs Arrowpoint, with a rather contemptuous stateliness, 'it is unnecessary to repeat

what has passed between us and our daughter. Mr Arrowpoint will tell you our resolution.'

'Your marrying is quite out of the question,' said Mr Arrowpoint, rather too heavily weighted with his task, and standing in an embarrassment unrelieved by a cigar. 'It is a wild scheme altogether. A man has been called out for less.'

'You have taken a base advantage of our confidence,' burst in Mrs Arrowpoint, unable to carry out her purpose and leave the burthen of speech to her husband.

Klesmer made a low bow in silent irony.

'The pretension is ridiculous. You had better give it up and leave the house at once,' continued Mr Arrowpoint. He wished to do without mentioning the money.

'I can give up nothing without reference to your daughter's wish,' said Klesmer. 'My engagement is to her.'

'It is useless to discuss the question,' said Mrs Arrowpoint. 'We shall never consent to the marriage. If Catherine disobeys us we shall disinherit her. You will not marry her fortune. It is right you should know that.'

'Madam, her fortune has been the only thing I have had to regret about her. But I must ask her if she will not think the sacrifice greater than I am worthy of.'

'It is no sacrifice to me,' said Catherine, 'except that I am sorry to hurt my father and mother. I have always felt my fortune to be a wretched fatality of my life.'

'You mean to defy us, then?' said Mrs Arrowpoint.

'I mean to marry Herr Klesmer,' said Catherine, firmly.

'He had better not count on our relenting,' said Mrs Arrowpoint, whose manners suffered from that impunity in insult which has been reckoned among the privileges of women.

'Madam,' said Klesmer, 'certain reasons forbid me to retort. But understand that I consider it out of the power either of you or of your fortune to confer on me anything that I value. My rank as an artist is of my own winning, and I would not exchange it for any other. I am able to maintain your daughter, and I ask for no change in my life but her companionship.'

'You will leave the house, however,' said Mrs Arrowpoint.

'I go at once,' said Klesmer, bowing and quitting the room.

'Let there be no misunderstanding, mamma,' said Catherine; 'I consider myself engaged to Herr Klesmer, and I intend to marry him.'

The mother turned her head away and waved her hand in sign of dismissal.

'It's all very fine,' said Mr Arrowpoint, when Catherine was gone; 'but what the deuce are we to do with the property?'

'There is Harry Brendall. He can take the name.'

'Harry Brendall will get through it all in no time,' said Mr Arrowpoint, relighting his cigar.

And thus, with nothing settled but the determination of the lovers, Klesmer had left Quetcham.

Chapter Twenty-Three

> Among the heirs of Art, as at the division of the promised land, each has to win his portion by hard fighting: the bestowal is after the manner of prophecy, and is a title without possession. To carry the map of an ungotten estate in your pocket is a poor sort of copyhold. And in fancy to cast his shoe over Edom is little warrant that a man shall ever set the sole of his foot on an acre of his own there.
>
> The most obstinate beliefs that mortals entertain about themselves are such as they have no evidence for beyond a constant, spontaneous pulsing of their self-satisfaction – as it were a hidden seed of madness, a confidence that they can move the world without precise notion of standing-place or lever.

'Pray go to church, mamma,' said Gwendolen the next morning. 'I prefer seeing Herr Klesmer alone.' (He had written in reply to her note that he would be with her at eleven.)

'That is hardly correct, I think,' said Mrs Davilow, anxiously.

'Our affairs are too serious for us to think of such nonsensical rules,' said Gwendolen, contemptuously. 'They are insulting as well as ridiculous.'

'You would not mind Isabel sitting with you? She would be reading in a corner.'

'No, she could not: she would bite her nails and stare. It would be too irritating. Trust my judgment, mamma. I must be alone. Take them all to church.'

Gwendolen had her way, of course; only that Miss Merry and two of the girls stayed at home, to give the house a look of habitation by sitting at the dining-room windows.

It was a delicious Sunday morning. The melancholy waning sunshine of autumn rested on the leaf-strown grass and came mildly through the windows in slanting bands of brightness over the old furniture, and the glass panel that reflected the furniture; over the tapestried chairs with their faded flower-wreaths, the dark enigmatic pictures, the superannuated organ at which Gwendolen had pleased herself with acting Saint Cecilia on her first joyous arrival, the crowd of pallid, dusty knick-knacks seen through the open doors of the ante-chamber where she had achieved the wearing of her Greek dress as Hermione. This last memory was just now very busy in her; for had not Klesmer then been struck with admiration of her pose and expression? Whatever he had said, whatever she imagined him to have thought, was at this moment pointed with keenest interest for her: perhaps she had never before in her life felt so inwardly dependent, so consciously in need of another person's opinion. There was a new fluttering of spirit within her, a new element of deliberation in her self-estimate which had hitherto been a blissful gift of intuition. Still it was the recurrent burthen of her inward soliloquy that Klesmer had seen but little of her, and any unfavourable conclusion of his must have too narrow a foundation. She really felt clever enough for anything.

To fill up the time she collected her volumes and pieces of music, and laying them on the top of the piano, set herself to classify them. Then catching the reflection of her movements in the glass panel, she was diverted to the contemplation of the image there and walked towards it. Dressed in black, without a single ornament, and with the warm whiteness of her skin set off between her light-brown coronet of hair and her square-cut bodice, she might have tempted an artist to try again the Roman trick of a statue in black, white, and tawny marble. Seeing her image slowly advancing, she thought, 'I *am* beautiful' – not exultingly, but with grave decision. Being beautiful was after all the condition on which she most needed external testimony. If any one objected to the turn of her nose or the form of her neck and chin, she had not the sense that she could presently show her power of attainment in these branches of feminine perfection.

There was not much time to fill up in this way before the sound of wheels, the loud ring, and the opening doors, assured her that she was not by any accident to be disappointed. This slightly increased her inward flutter. In spite of her self-confidence, she dreaded Klesmer as part of that unmanageable world which was independent of her wishes – something vitriolic that would not cease to burn because you smiled or frowned at it. Poor thing! she was at a higher crisis of her woman's fate than in her past experience with Grandcourt. The questioning then, was whether she should take a particular man as a husband. The inmost fold of her questioning now, was whether she need take a husband at all – whether she could not achieve substantiality for herself and know gratified ambition without bondage.

Klesmer made his most deferential bow in the wide doorway of the ante-chamber – showing also the deference of the finest grey kerseymere trousers and perfect gloves (the 'masters of those who know' are happily altogether human). Gwendolen met him with unusual gravity, and holding out her hand, said, 'It is

most kind of you to come, Herr Klesmer. I hope you have not thought me presumptuous.'

'I took your wish as a command that did me honour,' said Klesmer, with answering gravity. He was really putting by his own affairs in order to give his utmost attention to what Gwendolen might have to say; but his temperament was still in a state of excitation from the events of yesterday, likely enough to give his expressions a more than usually biting edge.

Gwendolen for once was under too great a strain of feeling to remember formalities. She continued standing near the piano, and Klesmer took his stand at the other end of it, with his back to the light and his terribly omniscient eyes upon her. No affection was of use, and she began without delay.

'I wish to consult you, Herr Klesmer. We have lost all our fortune; we have nothing. I must get my own bread, and I desire to provide for my mamma, so as to save her from any hardship. The only way I can think of – and I should like it better than anything – is to be an actress – to go on the stage. But of course I should like to take a high position, and I thought – if you thought I could,' – here Gwendolen became a little more nervous, – 'it would be better for me to be a singer – to study singing also.'

Klesmer put down his hat on the piano, and folded his arms as if to concentrate himself.

'I know,' Gwendolen resumed, turning from pale to pink and back again – 'I know that my method of singing is very defective; but I have been ill taught. I could be better taught; I could study. And you will understand my wish: – to sing and act too, like Grisi, is a much higher position. Naturally, I should wish to take as high a rank as I can. And I can rely on your judgment. I am sure you will tell me the truth.'

Gwendolen somehow had the conviction that now she made this serious appeal the truth would be favourable.

Still Klesmer did not speak. He drew off his gloves quickly, tossed them into his hat, rested his hands on his hips, and walked to the other end of the room. He was filled with compassion for this girl: he wanted to put a guard on his speech. When he turned again, he looked at her with a mild frown of inquiry, and said with gentle though quick utterance, 'You have never seen anything, I think, of artists and their lives? – I mean of musicians, actors, artists of that kind?'

'Oh no,' said Gwendolen, not perturbed by a reference to this obvious fact in the history of a young lady hitherto well provided for.

'You are, – pardon me,' said Klesmer, again pausing near the piano – 'in coming to a conclusion on such a matter as this, everything must be taken into consideration, – you are perhaps twenty?'

'I am twenty-one,' said Gwendolen, a slight fear rising in her. 'Do you think I am too old?'

Klesmer pouted his under lip and shook his long fingers upward in a manner totally enigmatic.

'Many persons begin later than others,' said Gwendolen, betrayed by her habitual consciousness of having valuable information to bestow.

Klesmer took no notice, but said with more studied gentleness than ever, 'You have probably not thought of an artistic career until now: you did not entertain the notion, the longing – what shall I say? – you did not wish yourself an actress, or anything of that sort, till the present trouble?'

'Not exactly; but I was fond of acting. I have acted; you saw me, if you remember – you saw me here in charades, and as Hermione,' said Gwendolen, really fearing that Klesmer had forgotten.

'Yes, yes,' he answered quickly, 'I remember – I remember perfectly,' and again walked to the other end of the room. It was difficult for him to refrain from this kind of movement when he was in any argument either audible or silent.

Gwendolen felt that she was being weighed. The delay was unpleasant. But she did not yet conceive that the scale could dip on the wrong side, and it seemed to her only graceful to say, 'I shall be very much obliged to you for taking the trouble to give me your advice, whatever it may be.'

'Miss Harleth,' said Klesmer, turning towards her and speaking with a slight increase of accent, 'I will veil nothing from you in this matter. I should reckon myself guilty if I put a false visage on things – made them too black or too white. The gods have a curse for him who willingly tells another the wrong road. And if I misled one who is so young, so beautiful – who, I trust, will find her happiness along the right road, I should regard myself as a – *Bösewichtl*.' In the last word Klesmer's voice had dropped to a loud whisper.

Gwendolen felt a sinking of heart under this unexpected solemnity, and kept a sort of fascinated gaze on Klesmer's face, while he went on.

'You are a beautiful young lady – you have been brought up in ease – you have done what you would – you have not said to yourself, "I must know this exactly," "I must understand this exactly," "I must do this exactly" ' – in uttering these three terrible *musts*, Klesmer lifted up three long fingers in succession. 'In sum, you have not been called upon to be anything but a charming young lady, whom it is an impoliteness to find fault with.'

He paused an instant; then resting his fingers on his hips again, and thrusting out his powerful chin, he said –

'Well, then, with that preparation, you wish to try the life of the artist; you wish to try a life of arduous,

unceasing work, and – uncertain praise. Your praise would have to be earned, like your bread; and both would come slowly, scantily – what do I say? – they might hardly come at all.'

This tone of discouragement, which Klesmer half hoped might suffice without anything more unpleasant, roused some resistance in Gwendolen. With a slight turn of her head away from him, and an air of pique, she said –

'I thought that you, being an artist, would consider the life one of the most honourable and delightful. And if I can do nothing better? – I suppose I can put up with the same risks as other people do.'

'Do nothing better?' said Klesmer, a little fired. 'No, my dear Miss Harleth, you could do nothing better – neither man nor woman could do anything better – if you could do what was best or good of its kind. I am not decrying the life of the true artist. I am exalting it. I say, it is out of the reach of any but choice organisations – natures framed to love perfection and to labour for it; ready, like all true lovers, to endure, to wait, to say, I am not yet worthy, but she – Art, my mistress – is worthy, and I will live to merit her. An honourable life? Yes. But the honour comes from the inward vocation and the hard-won achievement: there is no honour in donning the life as a livery.'

Some excitement of yesterday had revived in Klesmer and hurried him into speech a little aloof from his immediate friendly purpose. He had wished as delicately as possible to rouse in Gwendolen a sense of her unfitness for a perilous, difficult course; but it was his wont to be angry with the pretensions of incompetence, and he was in danger of getting chafed. Conscious of this he paused suddenly. But Gwendolen's chief impression was that he had not yet denied her the power of doing what would be good of its kind. Klesmer's fervour seemed to be a sort of glamour such as he was prone to throw over things in general; and what she desired to assure him of was that she was not afraid of some preliminary hardships. The belief that to present herself in public on the stage must produce an effect such as she had been used to feel certain of in private life, was like a bit of her flesh – it was not to be peeled off readily, but must come with blood and pain. She said, in a tone of some insistance –

'I am quite prepared to bear hardships at first. Of course no one can become celebrated all at once. And it is not necessary that every one should be first-rate – either actresses or singers. If you would be so kind as to tell me what steps I should take, I shall have the courage to take them. I don't mind going up hill. It will be easier than the dead level of being a governess. I will take any steps you recommend.'

Klesmer was more convinced now that he must speak plainly.

'I will tell you the steps, not that I recommend, but that will be forced upon you. It is all one, so far, what your goal may be – excellence, celebrity, second, third rateness – it is all one. You must go to town under the protection of your mother. You must put yourself under training – musical, dramatic, theatrical: – whatever you desire to do you have to learn –' here Gwendolen looked as if she were going to speak, but Klesmer lifted up his hand and said decisively, 'I know. You have exercised your talents – you recite – you sing – from the drawing-room *standpunkt*. My dear Fräulein, you must unlearn all that. You have not yet conceived what excellence is: you must unlearn your mistaken admirations. You must know what you have to strive for, and then you must subdue your mind and body to unbroken discipline. Your mind, I say. For you must not be thinking of celebrity: – put that candle out of your eyes, and look only at excellence. You would of course earn nothing – you could get no engagement for a long while. You would need money for yourself and your family. But that,' here Klesmer frowned and shook his fingers as if to dismiss a triviality – 'that could perhaps be found.'

Gwendolen turned pink and pale during this speech. Her pride had felt a terrible knife-edge, and the last sentence only made the smart keener. She was conscious of appearing moved, and tried to escape from her weakness by suddenly walking to a seat and pointing out a chair to Klesmer. He did not take it, but turned a little in order to face her and leaned against the piano. At that moment she wished that she had not sent for him: this first experience of being taken on some other ground than that of her social rank and her beauty was becoming bitter to her. Klesmer, preoccupied with a serious purpose, went on without change of tone.

'Now, what sort of issue might be fairly expected from all this self-denial? You would ask that. It is right that your eyes should be open to it. I will tell you truthfully. The issue would be uncertain and – most probably – would not be worth much.'

At these relentless words Klesmer put out his lip and looked through his spectacles with the air of a monster impenetrable by beauty.

Gwendolen's eyes began to burn, but the dread of showing weakness urged her to added self-control. She compelled herself to say in a hard tone –

'You think I want talent, or am too old to begin.'

Klesmer made a sort of hum and then descended on an emphatic 'Yes! The desire and the training should have begun seven years ago – or a good deal earlier. A mountebank's child who helps her father to earn shillings when she is six years old – a child that inherits a singing throat from a long line of choristers and

learns to sing as it learns to talk, has a likelier beginning. Any great achievement in acting or in music grows with the growth. Whenever an artist has been able to say, “I came, I saw, I conquered,” it has been at the end of patient practice. Genius at first is little more than a great capacity for receiving discipline. Singing and acting, like the fine dexterity of the juggler with his cups and balls, require a shaping of the organs towards a finer and finer certainty of effect. Your muscles – your whole frame – must go like a watch, true, true, true, to a hair. That is the work of spring-time, before habits have been determined.’

‘I did not pretend to genius,’ said Gwendolen, still feeling that she might somehow do what Klesmer wanted to represent as impossible. ‘I only supposed that I might have a little talent – enough to improve.’

‘I don’t deny that,’ said Klesmer. ‘If you had been put in the right track some years ago and had worked well you might now have made a public singer, though I don’t think your voice would have counted for much in public. For the stage your personal charms and intelligence might then have told without the present drawback of inexperience – lack of discipline – lack of instruction.’

Certainly Klesmer seemed cruel, but his feeling was the reverse of cruel. Our speech even when we are most single-minded can never take its line absolutely from one impulse; but Klesmer’s was as far as possible directed by compassion for poor Gwendolen’s ignorant eagerness to enter on a course of which he saw all the miserable details with a definiteness which he could not if he would have conveyed to her mind.

Gwendolen, however, was not convinced. Her self-opinion rallied, and since the counsellor whom she had called in gave a decision of such severe peremptoriness, she was tempted to think that his judgment was not only fallible but biassed. It occurred to her that a simpler and wiser step for her to have taken would have been to send a letter through the post to the manager of a London theatre, asking him to make an appointment. She would make no further reference to her singing: Klesmer, she saw, had set himself against her singing. But she felt equal to arguing with him about her going on the stage, and she answered in a resistant tone –

‘I understand, of course, that no one can be a finished actress at once. It may be impossible to tell beforehand whether I should succeed; but that seems to me a reason why I should try. I should have thought that I might have taken an engagement at a theatre meanwhile, so as to earn money and study at the same time.’

‘Can’t be done, my dear Miss Harleth – I speak plainly – it can’t be done. I must clear your mind of these notions, which have no more resemblance to reality than a pantomime. Ladies and gentlemen think that when they have made their toilet and drawn on their gloves they are as presentable on the stage as in a drawing-room. No manager thinks that. With all your grace and charm, if you were to present yourself as an aspirant to the stage, a manager would either require you to pay as an amateur for being allowed to perform, or he would tell you to go and be taught – trained to bear yourself on the stage, as a horse, however beautiful, must be trained for the circus; to say nothing of that study which would enable you to personate a character consistently, and animate it with the natural language of face, gesture, and tone. For you to get an engagement fit for you straight away is out of the question.’

‘I really cannot understand that,’ said Gwendolen, rather haughtily – then, checking herself, she added in another tone – ‘I shall be obliged to you if you will explain how it is that such poor actresses get engaged. I have been to the theatre several times, and I am sure there were actresses who seemed to me to act not at all well and who were quite plain.’

‘Ah, my dear Miss Harleth, that is the easy criticism of the buyer. We who buy slippers toss away this pair and the other as clumsy; but there went an apprenticeship to the making of them. Excuse me: you could not at present teach one of those actresses; but there is certainly much that she could teach you. For example, she can pitch her voice so as to be heard: ten to one you could not do it till after many trials. Merely to stand and move on the stage is an art – requires practice. It is understood that we are not now talking of a *comparse* in a petty theatre who earns the wages of a needlewoman. That is out of the question for you.’

‘Of course I must earn more than that,’ said Gwendolen, with a sense of wincing rather than of being refuted; ‘but I think I could soon learn to do tolerably well all those little things you have mentioned. I am not so very stupid. And even in Paris I am sure I saw two actresses playing important ladies’ parts who were not at all ladies and quite ugly. I suppose I have no particular talent, but I *must* think it is an advantage, even on the stage, to be a lady and not a perfect fright.’

‘Ah, let us understand each other,’ said Klesmer, with a flash of new meaning. ‘I was speaking of what you would have to go through if you aimed at becoming a real artist – if you took music and the drama as a higher vocation in which you would strive after excellence. On that head, what I have said stands fast. You would find – after your education in doing things slackly for one-and-twenty years – great difficulties in study: you would find mortifications in the treatment you would get when you presented yourself on the footing of skill. You would be subjected to tests; people would no longer feign not to see your blunders. You would at first only be accepted on trial. You would have to bear what I may call a glaring insignificance: any success must

be won by the utmost patience. You would have to keep your place in a crowd, and after all it is likely you would lose it and get out of sight. If you determine to face these hardships and still try, you will have the dignity of a high purpose, even though you may have chosen unfortunately. You will have some merit, though you may win no prize. You have asked my judgment on your chances of winning. I don't pretend to speak absolutely; but measuring probabilities, my judgment is: – you will hardly achieve more than mediocrity.'

Klesmer had delivered himself with emphatic rapidity, and now paused a moment. Gwendolen was motionless, looking at her hands, which lay over each other on her lap, till the deep-toned, long-drawn '*But*,' with which he resumed, had a startling effect, and made her look at him again.

'But – there are certainly other ideas, other dispositions with which a young lady may take up an art that will bring her before the public. She may rely on the unquestioned power of her beauty as a passport. She may desire to exhibit herself to an admiration which dispenses with skill. This goes a certain way on the stage: not in music: but on the stage, beauty is taken when there is nothing more commanding to be had. Not without some drilling, however: as I have said before, technicalities have in any case to be mastered. But these excepted, we have here nothing to do with art. The woman who takes up this career is not an artist: she is usually one who thinks of entering on a luxurious life by a short and easy road – perhaps by marriage – that is her most brilliant chance, and the rarest. Still, her career will not be luxurious to begin with: she can hardly earn her own poor bread independently at once, and the indignities she will be liable to are such as I will not speak of.'

'I desire to be independent,' said Gwendolen, deeply stung and confusedly apprehending some scorn for herself in Klesmer's words. 'That was my reason for asking whether I could not get an immediate engagement. Of course I cannot know how things go on about theatres. But I thought that I could have made myself independent. I have no money, and I will not accept help from any one.'

Her wounded pride could not rest without making this disclaimer. It was intolerable to her that Klesmer should imagine her to have expected other help from him than advice.

'That is a hard saying for your friends,' said Klesmer, recovering the gentleness of tone with which he had begun the conversation. 'I have given you pain. That was inevitable. I was bound to put the truth, the unvarnished truth, before you. I have not said – I will not say – you will do wrong to choose the hard, climbing path of an endeavouring artist. You have to compare its difficulties with those of any less hazardous – any more private course which opens itself to you. If you take that more courageous resolve I will ask leave to shake hands with you on the strength of our freemasonry, where we are all vowed to the service of Art, and to serve her by helping every fellow-servant.'

Gwendolen was silent, again looking at her hands. She felt herself very far away from taking the resolve that would enforce acceptance; and after waiting an instant or two, Klesmer went on with deepened seriousness.

'Where there is the duty of service there must be the duty of accepting it. The question is not one of personal obligation. And in relation to practical matters immediately affecting your future – excuse my permitting myself to mention in confidence an affair of my own. I am expecting an event which would make it easy for me to exert myself on your behalf in furthering your opportunities of instruction and residence in London – under the care, that is, of your family – without need for anxiety on your part. If you resolve to take art as a bread-study, you need only undertake the study at first; the bread will be found without trouble. The event I mean is my marriage, – in fact – you will receive this as a matter of confidence, – my marriage with Miss Arrowpoint, which will more than double such right as I have to be trusted by you as a friend. Your friendship will have greatly risen in value for *her* by your having adopted that generous labour.'

Gwendolen's face had begun to burn. That Klesmer was about to marry Miss Arrowpoint caused her no surprise, and at another moment she would have amused herself in quickly imagining the scenes that must have occurred at Quetcham. But what engrossed her feeling, what filled her imagination now, was the panorama of her own immediate future that Klesmer's words seemed to have unfolded. The suggestion of Miss Arrowpoint as a patroness was only another detail added to its repulsiveness: Klesmer's proposal to help her seemed an additional irritation after the humiliating judgment he had passed on her capabilities. His words had really bitten into her self-confidence and turned it into the pain of a bleeding wound; and the idea of presenting herself before other judges was now poisoned with the dread that they also might be harsh: they also would not recognise the talent she was conscious of. But she controlled herself, and rose from her seat before she made any answer. It seemed natural that she should pause. She went to the piano and looked absently at leaves of music, pinching up the corners. At last she turned towards Klesmer and said, with almost her usual air of proud equality, which in this interview had not been hitherto perceptible.

'I congratulate you sincerely, Herr Klesmer. I think I never saw any one more admirable than Miss Arrowpoint. And I have to thank you for every sort of kindness this morning. But I can't decide now. If I make the resolve you have spoken of, I will use your permission – I will let you know. But I fear the obstacles are

too great. In any case, I am deeply obliged to you. It was very bold of me to ask you to take this trouble.'

Klesmer's inward remark was, 'She will never let me know.' But with the most thorough respect in his manner, he said, 'Command me at any time. There is an address on this card which will always find me with little delay.'

When he had taken up his hat and was going to make his bow, Gwendolen's better self, conscious of an ingratitude which the clear-seeing Klesmer must have penetrated, made a desperate effort to find its way above the stifling layers of egoistic disappointment and irritation. Looking at him with a glance of the old gaiety, she put out her hand, and said with a smile, 'If I take the wrong road, it will not be because of your flattery.'

'God forbid that you should take any road but one where you will find and give happiness!' said Klesmer, fervently. Then, in foreign fashion, he touched her fingers lightly with his lips, and in another minute she heard the sound of his departing wheels getting more distant on the gravel.

Gwendolen had never in her life felt so miserable. No sob came, no passion of tears, to relieve her. Her eyes were burning; and the noonday only brought into more dreary clearness the absence of interest from her life. All memories, all objects, the pieces of music displayed, the open piano – the very reflection of herself in the glass – seemed no better than the packed-up shows of a departing fair. For the first time since her consciousness began, she was having a vision of herself on the common level, and had lost the innate sense that there were reasons why she should not be slighted, elbowed, jostled – treated like a passenger with a third-class ticket, in spite of private objections on her own part. She did not move about; the prospects begotten by disappointment were too oppressively preoccupying; she threw herself into the shadiest corner of a settee, and pressed her fingers over her burning eyelids. Every word that Klesmer had said seemed to have been branded into her memory, as most words are which bring with them a new set of impressions and make an epoch for us. Only a few hours before, the dawning smile of self-contentment rested on her lips as she vaguely imagined a future suited to her wishes: it seemed but the affair of a year or so for her to become the most approved Juliet of the time; or, if Klesmer encouraged her idea of being a singer, to proceed by more gradual steps to her place in the opera, while she won money and applause by occasional performances. Why not? At home, at school, among acquaintances, she had been used to have her conscious superiority admitted; and she had moved in a society where everything, from low arithmetic to high art, is of the amateur kind politely supposed to fall short of perfection only because gentlemen and ladies are not obliged to do more than they like – otherwise they would probably give forth abler writings and show themselves more commanding artists than any the world is at present obliged to put up with. The self-confident visions that had beguiled her were not of a highly exceptional kind; and she had at least shown some rationality in consulting the person who knew the most and had flattered her the least. In asking Klesmer's advice, however, she had rather been borne up by a belief in his latent admiration than bent on knowing anything more unfavourable that might have lain behind his slight objections to her singing; and the truth she had asked for with an expectation that it would be agreeable, had come like a lacerating thong.

'Too old – should have begun seven years ago – you will not, at best, achieve more than mediocrity – hard, incessant work, uncertain praise – bread coming slowly, scantily, perhaps not at all – mortifications, people no longer feigning not to see your blunders – glaring insignificance' – all these phrases rankled in her; and even more galling was the hint that she could only be accepted on the stage as a beauty who hoped to get a husband. The 'indignities' that she might be visited with had no very definite form for her, but the mere association of anything called 'indignity' with herself, roused a resentful alarm. And along with the vaguer images which were raised by those biting words, came the more precise conception of disagreeables which her experience enabled her to imagine. How could she take her mamma and the four sisters to London, if it were not possible for her to earn money at once? And as for submitting to be a *protégée*, and asking her mamma to submit with her to the humiliation of being supported by Miss Arrowpoint – that was as bad as being a governess; nay, worse; for suppose the end of all her study to be as worthless as Klesmer clearly expected it to be, the sense of favours received and never repaid, would embitter the miseries of disappointment. Klesmer doubtless had magnificent ideas about helping artists; but how could he know the feelings of ladies in such matters? It was all over: she had entertained a mistaken hope; and there was an end of it.

'An end of it!' said Gwendolen, aloud, starting from her seat as she heard the steps and voices of her mamma and sisters coming in from church. She hurried to the piano and began gathering together her pieces of music with assumed diligence, while the expression on her pale face and in her burning eyes was what would have suited a woman enduring a wrong which she might not resent, but would probably revenge.

'Well, my darling,' said gentle Mrs Davilow, entering, 'I see by the wheel-marks that Klesmer has been here. Have you been satisfied with the interview?' She had some guesses as to its object, but felt timid about implying them.

'Satisfied, mamma? oh yes,' said Gwendolen, in a high hard tone, for which she must be excused, because

she dreaded a scene of emotion. If she did not set herself resolutely to feign proud indifference, she felt that she must fall into a passionate outburst of despair, which would cut her mamma more deeply than all the rest of their calamities.

'Your uncle and aunt were disappointed at not seeing you,' said Mrs Davilow, coming near the piano, and watching Gwendolen's movements. 'I only said that you wanted rest.'

'Quite right, mamma,' said Gwendolen, in the same tone, turning to put away some music.

'Am I not to know anything now, Gwendolen? Am I always to be in the dark?' said Mrs Davilow, too keenly sensitive to her daughter's manner and expression not to fear that something painful had occurred.

'There is really nothing to tell now, mamma,' said Gwendolen, in a still higher voice. 'I had a mistaken idea about something I could do. Herr Klesmer has undeceived me. That is all.'

'Don't look and speak in that way, my dear child: I cannot bear it,' said Mrs Davilow, breaking down. She felt an undefinable terror.

Gwendolen looked at her a moment in silence, biting her inner lip; then she went up to her, and putting her hands on her mamma's shoulders, said, with a drop of her voice to the lowest undertone, 'Mamma, don't speak to me now. It is useless to cry and waste our strength over what can't be altered. You will live at Sawyer's Cottage, and I am going to the bishop's daughters. There is no more to be said. Things cannot be altered, and who cares? It makes no difference to any one else what we do. We must try not to care ourselves. We must not give way. I dread giving way. Help me to be quiet.'

Mrs Davilow was like a frightened child under her daughter's face and voice: her tears were arrested and she went away in silence.

Chapter Twenty-Four

I question things and do not find
One that will answer to my mind;
And all the world appears unkind.

– WORDSWORTH

Gwendolen was glad that she had got through her interview with Klesmer before meeting her uncle and aunt. She had made up her mind now that there were only disagreeables before her, and she felt able to maintain a dogged calm in the face of any humiliation that might be proposed.

The meeting did not happen until the Monday, when Gwendolen went to the Rectory with her mamma. They had called at Sawyer's Cottage by the way, and had seen every cranny of the narrow rooms in a mid-day light, unsoftened by blinds and curtains; for the furnishing to be done by gleanings from the Rectory had not yet begun.

'How *shall* you endure it, mamma?' said Gwendolen, as they walked away. She had not opened her lips while they were looking round at the bare walls and floors, and the little garden with the cabbage-stalks, and the yew arbour all dust and cobwebs within. 'You and the four girls all in that closet of a room, with the green and yellow paper pressing on your eyes? And without me?'

'It will be some comfort that you have not to bear it too, dear.'

'If it were not that I must get some money, I would rather be there than go to be a governess.'

'Don't set yourself against it beforehand, Gwendolen. If you go to the palace you will have every luxury about you. And you know how much you have always cared for that. You will not find it so hard as going up and down those steep narrow stairs, and hearing the crockery rattle through the house, and the dear girls talking.'

'It is like a bad dream,' said Gwendolen, impetuously. 'I cannot believe that my uncle will let you go to such a place. He ought to have taken some other steps.'

'Don't be unreasonable, dear child. What could he have done?'

'That was for him to find out. It seems to me a very extraordinary world if people in our position must sink in this way all at once,' said Gwendolen, the other worlds with which she was conversant being constructed with a sense of fitness that arranged her own future agreeably.

It was her temper that framed her sentences under this entirely new pressure of evils: she could have spoken more suitably on the vicissitudes in other people's lives, though it was never her aspiration to express herself virtuously so much as cleverly – a point to be remembered in extenuation of her words, which were usually worse than she was.

And, notwithstanding the keen sense of her own bruises, she was capable of some compunction when her uncle and aunt received her with a more affectionate kindness than they had ever shown before. She could not but be struck by the dignified cheerfulness with which they talked of the necessary economies in their way of living, and in the education of the boys. Mr Gascoigne's worth of character, a little obscured by worldly opportunities – as the poetic beauty of women is obscured by the demands of fashionable dressing – showed itself to great advantage under this sudden reduction of fortune. Prompt and methodical, he had set himself not only to put down his carriage, but to reconsider his worn suits of clothes, to leave off meat for breakfast, to do without periodicals, to get Edwy from school and arrange hours of study for all the boys under himself, and to order the whole establishment on the sparest footing possible. For all healthy people economy has its pleasures; and the Rector's spirit had spread through the household. Mrs Gascoigne and Anna, who always made papa their model, really did not miss anything they cared about for themselves, and in all sincerity felt that the saddest part of the family losses was the change for Mrs Davilow and her children.

Anna for the first time could merge her resentment on behalf of Rex in her sympathy with Gwendolen; and Mrs Gascoigne was disposed to hope that trouble would have a salutary effect on her niece, without thinking it her duty to add any bitters by way of increasing the salutariness. They had both been busy devising how to get blinds and curtains for the cottage out of the household stores; but with delicate feeling they left these matters in the background, and talked at first of Gwendolen's journey, and the comfort it was to her mamma

to have her at home again.

In fact there was nothing for Gwendolen to take as a justification for extending her discontent with events to the persons immediately around her, and she felt shaken into a more alert attention, as if by a call to drill that everybody else was obeying, when her uncle began in a voice of firm kindness to talk to her of the efforts he had been making to get her a situation which would offer her as many advantages as possible. Mr Gascoigne had not forgotten Grandcourt, but the possibility of further advances from that quarter was something too vague for a man of his good sense to be determined by it: uncertainties of that kind must not now slacken his action in doing the best he could for his niece under actual conditions.

'I felt that there was no time to be lost, Gwendolen; – for a position in a good family where you will have some consideration is not to be had at a moment's notice. And however long we waited we could hardly find one where you would be better off than at Bishop Mompert's. I am known to both him and Mrs Mompert, and that of course is an advantage for you. Our correspondence has gone on favourably; but I cannot be surprised that Mrs Mompert wishes to see you before making an absolute engagement. She thinks of arranging for you to meet her at Wanchester when she is on her way to town. I daresay you will feel the interview rather trying for you, my dear; but you will have a little time to prepare your mind.'

'Do you know *why* she wants to see me, uncle?' said Gwendolen, whose mind had quickly gone over various reasons that an imaginary Mrs Mompert with three daughters might be supposed to entertain, reasons all of a disagreeable kind to the person presenting herself for inspection.

The Rector smiled. 'Don't be alarmed, my dear. She would like to have a more precise idea of you than my report can give. And a mother is naturally scrupulous about a companion for her daughters. I have told her you are very young. But she herself exercises a close supervision over her daughters' education, and that makes her less anxious as to age. She is a woman of taste and also of strict principle, and objects to having a French person in the house. I feel sure that she will think your manners and accomplishments as good as she is likely to find; and over the religious and moral tone of the education she, and indeed the bishop himself, will preside.'

Gwendolen dared not answer, but the repression of her decided dislike to the whole prospect sent an unusually deep flush over her face and neck, subsiding as quickly as it came. Anna, full of tender fears, put her little hand into her cousin's, and Mr Gascoigne was too kind a man not to conceive something of the trail which this sudden change must be for a girl like Gwendolen. Bent on giving a cheerful view of things, he went on in an easy tone of remark, not as if answering supposed objections –

'I think so highly of the position, that I should have been tempted to try and get it for Anna, if she had been at all likely to meet Mrs Mompert's wants. It is really a home, with a continuance of education in the highest sense: "governess" is a misnomer. The bishop's views are of a more decidedly Low Church colour than my own – he is a close friend of Lord Grampian's; but though privately strict, he is not by any means narrow in public matters. Indeed, he has created as little dislike in his diocese as any bishop on the bench. He has always remained friendly to me, though before his promotion, when he was an incumbent of this diocese, we had a little controversy about the Bible Society.'

The Rector's words were too pregnant with satisfactory meaning to himself for him to imagine the effect they produced on the mind of his niece. 'Continuance of education' – 'bishop's views' – 'privately strict' – 'Bible Society,' – it was as if he had introduced a few snakes at large for the instruction of ladies who regarded them as all alike furnished with poison-bags, and biting or stinging according to convenience. To Gwendolen, already shrinking from the prospect opened to her, such phrases came like the growing heat of a burning-glass – not at all as the links of persuasive reflection which they formed for the good uncle. She began desperately to seek an alternative.

'There was another situation, I think, mamma spoke of?' she said, with determined self-mastery.

'Yes,' said the Rector, in rather a depreciatory tone; 'but that is in a school. I should not have the same satisfaction in your taking that. It would be much harder work, you are aware, and not so good in any other respect. Besides, you have not an equal chance of getting it.'

'Oh dear no,' said Mrs Gascoigne, 'it would be much harder for you, my dear – much less appropriate. You might not have a bedroom to yourself.' And Gwendolen's memories of school suggested other particulars which forced her to admit to herself that this alternative would be no relief. She turned to her uncle again and said, apparently in acceptance of his ideas –

'When is Mrs Mompert likely to send for me?'

'That is rather uncertain, but she has promised not to entertain any other proposal till she has seen you. She has entered with much feeling into your position. It will be within the next fortnight, probably. But I must be off now. I am going to let part of my glebe uncommonly well.'

The Rector ended very cheerfully, leaving the room with the satisfactory conviction that Gwendolen was going to adapt herself to circumstances like a girl of good sense. Having spoken appropriately, he naturally

supposed that the effects would be appropriate; being accustomed as a household and parish authority to be asked to 'speak to' refractory persons, with the understanding that the measure was morally coercive.

'What a stay Henry is to us all!' said Mrs Gascoigne, when her husband had left the room.

'He is indeed,' said Mrs Davilow, cordially. 'I think cheerfulness is a fortune in itself. I wish I had it.'

'And Rex is just like him,' said Mrs Gascoigne. 'I must tell you the comfort we have had in a letter from him. I must read you a little bit,' she added, taking the letter from her pocket, while Anna looked rather frightened – she did not know why, except that it had been a rule with her not to mention Rex before Gwendolen.

The proud mother ran her eyes over the letter, seeking for sentences to read aloud. But apparently she had found it sown with what might seem to be closer allusions than she desired to the recent past, for she looked up, folding the letter, and saying –

'However, he tells us that our trouble has made a man of him; he sees a reason for any amount of work: he means to get a fellowship, to take pupils, to set one of his brothers going, to be everything that is most remarkable. The letter is full of fun – just like him. He says, "Tell mother she has put out an advertisement for a jolly good hardworking son, in time to hinder me from taking ship; and I offer myself for the place." The letter came on Friday. I never saw my husband so much moved by anything since Rex was born. It seemed a gain to balance our loss.'

This letter, in fact, was what had helped both Mrs Gascoigne and Anna to show Gwendolen an unmixed kindliness; and she herself felt very amiably about it, smiling at Anna and pinching her chin as much as to say, 'Nothing is wrong with you now, is it?' She had no gratuitously ill-natured feeling, or egoistic pleasure in making men miserable. She only had an intense objection to their making her miserable.

But when the talk turned on furniture for the cottage, Gwendolen was not roused to show even a languid interest. She thought that she had done as much as could be expected of her this morning, and indeed felt at an heroic pitch in keeping to herself the struggle that was going on within her. The recoil of her mind from the only definite prospect allowed her, was stronger than even she had imagined beforehand. The idea of presenting herself before Mrs Mompert in the first instance, to be approved or disapproved, came as pressure on an already painful bruise: even as a governess, it appeared she was to be tested and was liable to rejection. After she had done herself the violence to accept the bishop and his wife, they were still to consider whether they would accept her; it was at her peril that she was to look, speak, or be silent. And even when she had entered on her dismal task of self-constraint in the society of three girls whom she was bound incessantly to edify, the same process of inspection was to go on: there was always to be Mrs Mompert's supervision; always something or other would be expected of her to which she had not the slightest inclination; and perhaps the bishop would examine her on serious topics. Gwendolen, lately used to the social successes of a handsome girl, whose lively venturesomeness of talk has the effect of wit, and who six weeks before would have pitied the dulness of the bishop rather than have been embarrassed by him, saw the life before her as an entrance into a penitentiary. Wild thoughts of running away to be an actress, in spite of Klesmer, came to her with the lure of freedom; but his words still hung heavily on her soul; they had alarmed her pride and even her maidenly dignity: dimly she conceived herself getting amongst vulgar people who would treat her with rude familiarity – odious men, whose grins and smirks would not be seen through the strong grating of polite society. Gwendolen's daring was not in the least that of the adventuress; the demand to be held a lady was in her very marrow; and when she had dreamed that she might be the heroine of the gaming-table, it was with the understanding that no one should treat her with the less consideration, or presume to look at her with irony as Deronda had done. To be protected and petted, and to have her susceptibilities consulted in every detail, had gone along with her food and clothing as matters of course in her life: even without any such warning as Klesmer's she could not have thought it an attractive freedom to be thrown in solitary dependence on the doubtful civility of strangers. The endurance of the episcopal penitentiary was less repulsive than that; though here too she would certainly never be petted or have her susceptibilities consulted. Her rebellion against this hard necessity which had come just to her of all people in the world – to her whom all circumstances had concurred in preparing for something quite different – was exaggerated instead of diminished as one hour followed another, filled with the imagination of what she might have expected in her lot and what it was actually to be. The family troubles, she thought, were easier for every one than for her – even for poor dear mamma, because she had always used herself to not enjoying. As to hoping that if she went to the Momperts' and was patient a little while, things might get better – it would be stupid to entertain hopes for herself after all that had happened: her talents, it appeared, would never be recognised as anything remarkable, and there was not a single direction in which probability seemed to flatter her wishes. Some beautiful girls who, like her, had read romances where even plain governesses are centres of attraction and are sought in marriage, might have solaced themselves a little by transporting such pictures into their own future; but even if Gwendolen's experience had led her to dwell on love-making and marriage as her elysium, her heart was too much oppressed by what was near to her, in both the past and the future, for her to project

her anticipations very far off. She had a world-nausea upon her, and saw no reason all through her life why she should wish to live. No religious view of trouble helped her: her troubles had in her opinion all been caused by other people's disagreeable or wicked conduct; and there was really nothing pleasant to be counted on in the world: that was her feeling; everything else she had heard said about trouble was mere phrase-making not attractive enough for her to have caught it up and repeated it. As to the sweetness of labour and fulfilled claims; the interest of inward and outward activity; the impersonal delights of life as a perpetual discovery; the dues of courage, fortitude, industry, which it is mere baseness not to pay towards the common burthen; the supreme worth of the teacher's vocation; – these, even if they had been eloquently preached to her, could have been no more than faintly apprehended doctrines: the fact which wrought upon her was her invariable observation that for a lady to become a governess – to 'take a situation' – was to descend in life and to be treated at best with a compassionate patronage. And poor Gwendolen had never dissociated happiness from personal pre-eminence and *éclat*. That where these threatened to forsake her, she should take life to be hardly worth the having, cannot make her so unlike the rest of us, men or women, that we should cast her out of our compassion; our moments of temptation to a mean opinion of things in general being usually dependent on some susceptibility about ourselves and some dulness to subjects which every one else would consider more important. Surely a young creature is pitiable who has the labyrinth of life before her and no clue – to whom distrust in herself and her good fortune has come as a sudden shock, like a rent across the path that she was treading carelessly.

In spite of her healthy frame, her irreconcilable repugnance affected her even physically: she felt a sort of numbness and could set about nothing; the least urgency, even that she should take her meals, was an irritation to her; the speech of others on any subject seemed unreasonable, because it did not include her feeling and was an ignorant claim on her. It was not in her nature to busy herself with the fancies of suicide to which disappointed young people are prone: what occupied and exasperated her was the sense that there was nothing for her but to live in a way she hated. She avoided going to the Rectory again: it was too intolerable to have to look and talk as if she were compliant; and she could not exert herself to show interest about the furniture of that horrible cottage. Miss Merry was staying on purpose to help, and such people as Jocosa liked that sort of thing. Her mother had to make excuses for her not appearing, even when Anna came to see her. For that calm which Gwendolen had promised herself to maintain had changed into sick motivelessness: she thought, 'I suppose I shall begin to pretend by-and-by, but why should I do it now?'

Her mother watched her with silent distress; and, lapsing into the habit of indulgent tenderness, she began to think what she imagined that Gwendolen was thinking, and to wish that everything should give way to the possibility of making her darling less miserable.

One day when she was in the black and yellow bedroom and her mother was lingering there under the pretext of considering and arranging Gwendolen's articles of dress, she suddenly roused herself to fetch the casket which contained her ornaments.

'Mamma,' she began, glancing over the upper layer, 'I had forgotten these things. Why didn't you remind me of them? Do see about getting them sold. You will not mind about parting with them. You gave them all to me long ago.'

She lifted the upper tray and looked below.

'If we can do without them, darling, I would rather keep them for you,' said Mrs Davilow, seating herself beside Gwendolen with a feeling of relief that she was beginning to talk about something. The usual relation between them had become reversed. It was now the mother who tried to cheer the daughter. 'Why, how came you to put that pocket-handkerchief in here?'

It was the handkerchief with the corner torn off which Gwendolen had thrust in with the turquoise necklace.

'It happened to be with the necklace – I was in a hurry,' said Gwendolen, taking the handkerchief away and putting it in her pocket. 'Don't sell the necklace, mamma,' she added, a new feeling having come over her about that rescue of it which had formerly been so offensive.

'No, dear, no; it was made out of your dear father's chain. And I should prefer not selling the other things. None of them are of any great value. All my best ornaments were taken from me long ago.'

Mrs Davilow coloured. She usually avoided any reference to such facts about Gwendolen's step-father as that he had carried off his wife's jewellery and disposed of it. After a moment's pause she went on –

'And these things have not been reckoned on for any expenses. Carry them with you.'

'That would be quite useless, mamma,' said Gwendolen, coldly. 'Governesses don't wear ornaments. You had better get me a grey frieze livery and a straw poke, such as my aunt's charity children wear.'

'No, dear, no; don't take that view of it. I feel sure the Momperts will like you the better for being graceful and elegant.'

'I am not at all sure what the Momperts will like me to be. It is enough that I am expected to be what they

like,' said Gwendolen, bitterly.

'If there is anything you would object to less – anything that could be done – instead of your going to the bishop's, do say so, Gwendolen. Tell me what is in your heart. I will try for anything you wish,' said the mother, beseechingly. 'Don't keep things away from me. Let us bear them together.'

'Oh mamma, there is nothing to tell. I can't do anything better. I must think myself fortunate if they will have me. I shall get some money for you. That is the only thing I have to think of. I shall not spend any money this year: you will have all the eighty pounds. I don't know how far that will go in housekeeping; but you need not stitch your poor fingers to the bone, and stare away all the sight that the tears have left in your dear eyes.'

Gwendolen did not give any caresses with her words as she had been used to do. She did not even look at her mother, but was looking at the turquoise necklace as she turned it over her fingers.

'Bless you for your tenderness, my good darling!' said Mrs Davilow, with tears in her eyes. 'Don't despair because there are clouds now. You are so young. There may be great happiness in store for you yet.'

'I don't see any reason for expecting it, mamma,' said Gwendolen, in a hard tone; and Mrs Davilow was silent, thinking as she had often thought before – 'What did happen between her and Mr Grandcourt?'

'I *will* keep this necklace, mamma,' said Gwendolen, laying it apart and then closing the casket. 'But do get the other things sold even if they will not bring much. Ask my uncle what to do with them. I shall certainly not use them again. I am going to take the veil. I wonder if all the poor wretches who have ever taken it felt as I do.'

'Don't exaggerate evils, dear.'

'How can any one know that I exaggerate, when I am speaking of my own feeling? I did not say what any one else felt.'

She took out the torn handkerchief from her pocket again, and wrapt it deliberately round the necklace. Mrs Davilow observed the action with some surprise, but the tone of the last words discouraged her from asking any question.

The 'feeling' Gwendolen spoke of with an air of tragedy was not to be explained by the mere fact that she was going to be a governess: she was possessed by a spirit of general disappointment. It was not simply that she had a distaste for what she was called on to do: the distaste spread itself over the world outside her penitentiary, since she saw nothing very pleasant in it that seemed attainable by her even if she were free. Naturally her grievances did not seem to her smaller than some of her male contemporaries held theirs to be when they felt a profession too narrow for their powers, and had an *à priori* conviction that it was not worth while to put forth their latent abilities. Because her education had been less expensive than theirs, it did not follow that she should have wider emotions or a keener intellectual vision. Her griefs were feminine; but to her as a woman they were not the less hard to bear, and she felt an equal right to the Promethean tone.

But the movement of mind which led her to keep the necklace, to fold it up in the handkerchief, and rise to put it in her *nécessaire*, where she had first placed it when it had been returned to her, was more peculiar, and what would be called less reasonable. It came from that streak of superstition in her which attached itself both to her confidence and her terror – a superstition which lingers in an intense personality even in spite of theory and science; any dread or hope for self being stronger than all reasons for or against it. Why she should suddenly determine not to part with the necklace was not much clearer to her than why she should sometimes have been frightened to find herself in the fields alone; she had a confused state of emotion about Deronda – was it wounded pride and resentment, or a certain awe and exceptional trust? It was something vague and yet mastering, which impelled her to this action about the necklace. There is a great deal of unmapped country within us which would have to be taken into account in an explanation of our gusts and storms.

Chapter Twenty-Five

> How trace the why and wherefore in a mind reduced to the barrenness of a fastidious egoism, in which all direct desires are dulled, and have dwindled from motives into a vacillating expectation of motives: a mind made up of moods, where a fitful impulse springs here and there conspicuously rank amid the general weediness? 'Tis a condition apt to befall a life too much at large, unmoulded by the pressure of obligation. *Nam deteriores omnes sumus licentiæ*, saith Terence;[9] or, as a more familiar tongue might deliver it, '*As you like' is a bad finger-post*.

Potentates make known their intentions and affect the funds at a small expense of words. So, when Grandcourt, after learning that Gwendolen had left Leubronn, incidentally pronounced that resort of fashion a beastly hole worse than Baden, the remark was conclusive to Mr Lush that his patron intended straightway to return to Diplow. The execution was sure to be slower than the intention, and in fact Grandcourt did loiter through the next day without giving any distinct orders about departure – perhaps because he discerned that Lush was expecting them: he lingered over his toilet, and certainly came down with a faded aspect of perfect distinction which made fresh complexions, and hands with the blood in them, seem signs of raw vulgarity; he lingered on the terrace, in the gambling-rooms, in the reading-room, occupying himself in being indifferent to everybody and everything around him. When he met Lady Mallinger, however, he took some trouble – raised his hat, paused, and proved that he listened to her recommendation of the waters by replying, 'Yes; I heard somebody say how providential it was that there always happened to be springs at gambling places.'

'Oh, that was a joke,' said innocent Lady Mallinger, misled by Grandcourt's languid seriousness, 'in imitation of the old one about the towns and the rivers, you know.'

'Ah, perhaps,' said Grandcourt, without change of expression. Lady Mallinger thought this worth telling to Sir Hugo, who said, 'Oh, my dear, he is not a fool. You must not suppose that he can't see a joke. He can play his cards as well as most of us.'

'He has never seemed to me a very sensible man,' said Lady Mallinger, in excuse of herself. She had a secret objection to meeting Grandcourt, who was little else to her than a large living sign of what she felt to be her failure as a wife – the not having presented Sir Hugo with a son. Her constant reflection was that her husband might fairly regret his choice, and if he had not been very good might have treated her with some roughness in consequence, gentlemen naturally disliking to be disappointed.

Deronda, too, had a recognition from Grandcourt, for which he was not grateful, though he took care to return it with perfect civility. No reasoning as to the foundations of custom could do away with the early-rooted feeling that his birth had been attended with injury for which his father was to blame; and seeing that but for this injury Grandcourt's prospect might have been his, he was proudly resolute not to behave in any way that might be interpreted into irritation on that score. He saw a very easy descent into mean unreasoning rancour and triumph in others' frustration; and being determined not to go down that ugly pit, he turned his back on it, clinging to the kindlier affections within him as a possession. Pride certainly helped him well – the pride of not recognising a disadvantage for one's self which vulgar minds are disposed to exaggerate, such as the shabby equipage of poverty: he would not have a man like Grandcourt suppose himself envied by him. But there is no guarding against interpretation. Grandcourt did believe that Deronda, poor devil, who he had no doubt was his cousin by the father's side, inwardly winced under their mutual position; wherefore the presence of that less lucky person was more agreeable to him than it would otherwise have been. An imaginary envy, the idea that others feel their comparative deficiency, is the ordinary *cortège* of egoism; and his pet dogs were not the only beings that Grandcourt liked to feel his power over in making them jealous. Hence he was civil enough to exchange several words with Deronda on the terrace about the hunting round Diplow, and even said, 'You had better come over for a run or two when the season begins.'

Lush, not displeased with delay, amused himself very well, partly in gossiping with Sir Hugo and in answering his questions about Grandcourt's affairs so far as they might affect his willingness to part with his interest in Diplow. Also about Grandcourt's personal entanglements, the baronet knew enough already for Lush to feel released from silence on a sunny autumn day, when there was nothing more agreeable to do in lounging promenades than to speak freely of a tyrannous patron behind his back. Sir Hugo willingly inclined his ear to a little good-humoured scandal, which he was fond of calling *traits de mœurs*; but he was strict in keeping such communications from hearers who might take them too seriously. Whatever knowledge he had

of his nephew's secrets, he had never spoken of it to Deronda, who considered Grandcourt a pale-blooded mortal, but was far from wishing to hear how the red corpuscles had been washed out of him. It was Lush's policy and inclination to gratify everybody when he had no reason to the contrary; and the baronet always treated him well, as one of those easy-handled personages who, frequenting the society of gentlemen, without being exactly gentlemen themselves, can be the more serviceable, like the second-best articles of our wardrobe, which we use with a comfortable freedom from anxiety.

'Well, you will let me know the turn of events,' said Sir Hugo, 'if this marriage seems likely to come off after all, or if anything else happens to make the want of money more pressing. My plan would be much better for him than burthening Ryelands.'

'That's true,' said Lush, 'only it must not be urged on him – just placed in his way that the scent may tickle him. Grandcourt is not a man to be always led by what makes for his own interest; especially if you let him see that it makes for your interest too. I'm attached to him, of course. I've given up everything else for the sake of keeping by him, and it has lasted a good fifteen years now. He would not easily get any one else to fill my place. He's a peculiar character, is Henleigh Grandcourt, and it has been growing on him of late years. However, I'm of a constant disposition, and I've been a sort of guardian to him since he was twenty: an uncommonly fascinating fellow he was then, to be sure – and could be now, if he liked. I'm attached to him; and it would be a good deal worse for him if he missed me at his elbow.'

Sir Hugo did not think it needful to express his sympathy or even assent, and perhaps Lush himself did not expect this sketch of his motives to be taken as exact. But how can a man avoid himself as a subject in conversation? And he must make some sort of decent toilet in words, as in cloth and linen. Lush's listener was not severe: a member of Parliament could allow for the necessities of verbal toilet; and the dialogue went on without any change of mutual estimate.

However, Lush's easy prospect of indefinite procrastination was cut off the next morning by Grandcourt's saluting him with the question –

'Are you making all the arrangements for our starting by the Paris train?'

'I didn't know you meant to start,' said Lush, not exactly taken by surprise.

'You might have known,' said Grandcourt, looking at the burnt length of his cigar, and speaking in that lowered tone which was usual with him when he meant to express disgust and be peremptory. 'Just see to everything, will you? and mind no brute gets into the same carriage with us. And leave my P.P.C. at the Mallingers.'

In consequence they were at Paris the next day; but here Lush was gratified by the proposal or command that he should go straight on to Diplow and see that everything was right, while Grandcourt and the valet remained behind; and it was not until several days later that Lush received the telegram ordering the carriage to the Wanchester station.

He had used the interim actively, not only in carrying out Grandcourt's orders about the stud and household, but in learning all he could of Gwendolen, and how things were going on at Offendene. What was the probable effect that the news of the family misfortunes would have on Grandcourt's fitful obstinacy he felt to be quite incalculable. So far as the girl's poverty might be an argument that she would accept an offer from him now in spite of any previous coyness, it might remove that bitter objection to risk a repulse which Lush divined to be one of Grandcourt's deterring motives; on the other hand, the certainty of acceptance was just 'the sort of thing' to make him lapse hither and thither with no more apparent will than a moth. Lush had had his patron under close observation for many years, and knew him perhaps better than he knew any other subject; but to know Grandcourt was to doubt what he would do in any particular case. It might happen that he would behave with an apparent magnanimity, like the hero of a modern French drama, whose sudden start into moral splendour after much lying and meanness, leaves you little confidence as to any part of his career that may follow the fall of the curtain. Indeed, what attitude would have been more honourable for a final scene than that of declining to seek an heiress for her money, and determining to marry the attractive girl who had none? But Lush had some general certainties about Grandcourt, and one was, that of all inward movements those of generosity were the least likely to occur in him. Of what use, however, is a general certainty that an insect will not walk with his head hindmost, when what you need to know is the play of inward stimulus that sends him hither and thither in a network of possible paths? Thus Lush was much at fault as to the probable issue between Grandcourt and Gwendolen, when what he desired was a perfect confidence that they would never be married. He would have consented willingly that Grandcourt should marry an heiress, or that he should marry Mrs Glasher: in the one match there would have been the immediate abundance that prospective heirship could not supply, in the other there would have been the security of the wife's gratitude, for Lush had always been Mrs Glasher's friend; and that the future Mrs Grandcourt should not be socially received could not affect his private comfort. He would not have minded, either, that there should be no marriage in question at all; but he felt himself justified in doing his utmost to

hinder a marriage with a girl who was likely to bring nothing but trouble to her husband – not to speak of annoyance if not ultimate injury to her husband's old companion, whose future Mr Lush earnestly wished to make as easy as possible, considering that he had well deserved such compensation for leading a dog's life, though that of a dog who enjoyed many tastes undisturbed, and who profited by a large establishment. He wished for himself what he felt to be good, and was not conscious of wishing harm to any one else; unless perhaps it were just now a little harm to the inconvenient and impertinent Gwendolen. But the easiest-humoured amateur of luxury and music, the toad-eater the least liable to nausea, must be expected to have his susceptibilities. And Mr Lush was accustomed to be treated by the world in general as an apt, agreeable fellow: he had not made up his mind to be insulted by more than one person.

With this imperfect preparation of a war policy, Lush was awaiting Grandcourt's arrival, doing little more than wondering how the campaign would begin. The first day Grandcourt was much occupied with the stables, and amongst other things he ordered a groom to put a side-saddle on Criterion and let him review the horse's paces. This marked indication of purpose set Lush on considering over again whether he should incur the ticklish consequences of speaking first, while he was still sure that no compromising step had been taken; and he rose the next morning almost resolved that if Grandcourt seemed in as good a humour as yesterday and entered at all into talk, he would let drop the interesting facts about Gwendolen and her family, just to see how they would work, and to get some guidance. But Grandcourt did not enter into talk, and in answer to a question even about his own convenience, no fish could have maintained a more unwinking silence. After he had read his letters he gave various orders to be executed or transmitted by Lush, and then thrust his shoulders towards that useful person, who accordingly rose to leave the room. But before he was out of the door Grandcourt turned his head slightly and gave a broken languid 'Oh.'

'What is it?' said Lush, who, it must have been observed, did not take his dusty puddings with a respectful air.

'Shut the door, will you? I can't speak into the corridor.'

Lush closed the door, came forward, and chose to sit down.

After a little pause Grandcourt said, 'Is Miss Harleth at Offendene?' He was quite certain that Lush had made it his business to inquire about her, and he had some pleasure in thinking that Lush did not want *him* to inquire.

'Well, I hardly know,' said Lush, carelessly. 'The family's utterly done up. They and the Gascoignes too have lost all their money. It's owing to some rascally banking business. The poor mother hasn't a *sou*, it seems. She and the girls have to huddle themselves into a little cottage like a labourer's.'

'Don't lie to me, if you please,' said Grandcourt, in his lowest audible tone. 'It's not amusing, and it answers no other purpose.'

'What do you mean?' said Lush, more nettled than was common with him – the prospect before him being more than commonly disturbing.

'Just tell me the truth, will you?'

'It's no invention of mine. I have heard the story from several – Bazley, Brackenshaw's man, for one. He is getting a new tenant for Offendene.'

'I don't mean that. Is Miss Harleth there, or is she not?' said Grandcourt, in his former tone.

'Upon my soul, I can't tell,' said Lush, rather sulkily. 'She may have left yesterday. I heard she had taken a situation as governess; she may be gone to it for what I know. But if you wanted to see her no doubt the mother would send for her back.' This sneer slipped off his tongue without strict intention.

'Send Hutchins to inquire whether she will be there to-morrow.'

Lush did not move. Like many persons who have thought over beforehand what they shall say in given cases, he was impelled by an unexpected irritation to say some of those prearranged things before the cases were given. Grandcourt, in fact, was likely to get into a scrape so tremendous, that it was impossible to let him take the first step towards it without remonstrance. Lush retained enough caution to use a tone of rational friendliness; still he felt his own value to his patron, and was prepared to be daring.

'It would be as well for you to remember, Grandcourt, that you are coming under closer fire now. There can be none of the ordinary flirting done, which may mean everything or nothing. You must make up your mind whether you wish to be accepted; and more than that, how you would like being refused. Either one or the other. You can't be philandering after her again for six weeks.'

Grandcourt said nothing, but pressed the newspaper down on his knees and began to light another cigar. Lush took this as a sign that he was willing to listen, and was the more bent on using the opportunity; he wanted if possible to find out which would be the more potent cause of hesitation – probable acceptance or probable refusal.

'Everything has a more serious look now than it had before. There is her family to be provided for. You could not let your wife's mother live in beggary. It will be a confoundedly hampering affair. Marriage will pin

you down in a way you haven't been used to; and in point of money you have not too much elbow-room. And after all, what will you get by it? You are master over your estates, present or future, as far as choosing your heir goes; it's a pity to go on encumbering them for a mere whim, which you may repent of in a twelvemonth. I should be sorry to see you making a mess of your life in that way. If there were anything solid to be gained by the marriage, that would be a different affair.'

Lush's tone had gradually become more and more unctuous in its friendliness of remonstrance, and he was almost in danger of forgetting that he was merely gambling in argument. When he left off, Grandcourt took his cigar out of his mouth, and looking steadily at the moist end while he adjusted the leaf with his delicate finger-tips, said –

'I knew before that you had an objection to my marrying Miss Harleth.' Here he made a little pause, before he continued, 'But I never considered that a reason against it.'

'I never supposed you did,' answered Lush, not unctuously, but drily. 'It was not *that* I urged as a reason. I should have thought it might have been a reason against it, after all your experience, that you would be acting like the hero of a ballad, and making yourself absurd – and all for what? You know you couldn't make up your mind before. It's impossible you can care much about her. And as for the tricks she is likely to play, you may judge of that from what you heard at Leubronn. However, what I wished to point out to you was, that there can be no shilly-shally now.'

'Perfectly,' said Grandcourt, looking round at Lush and fixing him with narrow eyes; 'I don't intend that there should be. I daresay it's disagreeable to you. But if you suppose I care a damn for that, you are most stupendously mistaken.'

'Oh, well,' said Lush, rising with his hands in his pockets, and feeling some latent venom stir within him, 'if you have made up your mind! – only there's another aspect of the affair. I have been speaking on the supposition that it was absolutely certain she would accept you, and that destitution would have no choice. But I am not so sure that the young lady is to be counted on. She is kittle cattle to shoe, I think. And she had her reasons for running away before.' Lush had moved a step or two till he stood nearly in front of Grandcourt, though at some distance from him. He did not feel himself much restrained by consequences, being aware that the only strong hold he had on his present position was his serviceableness; and even after a quarrel, the want of him was likely sooner or later to recur. He foresaw that Gwendolen would cause him to be ousted for a time, and his temper at this moment urged him to risk a quarrel.

'She had her reasons,' he repeated, more significantly.

'I had come to that conclusion before,' said Grandcourt, with contemptuous irony.

'Yes, but I hardly think you know what her reasons were.'

'You do, apparently,' said Grandcourt, not betraying by so much as an eyelash that he cared for the reasons.

'Yes, and you had better know too, that you may judge of the influence you have over her if she swallows her reasons and accepts you. For my own part, I would take odds against it. She saw Lydia in Cardell Chase and heard the whole story.'

Grandcourt made no immediate answer, and only went on smoking. He was so long before he spoke, that Lush moved about and looked out of the windows, unwilling to go away without seeing some effect of his daring move. He had expected that Grandcourt would tax him with having contrived the affair, since Mrs Glasher was then living at Gadsmere a hundred miles off, and he was prepared to admit the fact: what he cared about was that Grandcourt should be staggered by the sense that his intended advances must be made to a girl who had that knowledge in her mind and had been scared by it. At length Grandcourt, seeing Lush turn towards him, looked at him again and said, contemptuously, 'What follows?'

Here certainly was a 'mate' in answer to Lush's 'check;' and though his exasperation with Grandcourt was perhaps stronger than it had ever been before, it would have been mere idiocy to act as if any further move could be useful. He gave a slight shrug with one shoulder, and was going to walk away, when Grandcourt, turning on his seat towards the table, said, as quietly as if nothing had occurred, 'Oblige me by pushing that pen and paper here, will you?'

No thunderous, bullying superior could have exercised the imperious spell that Grandcourt did. Why, instead of being obeyed, he had never been told to go to a warmer place, was perhaps a mystery to several who found themselves obeying him. The pen and paper were pushed to him, and as he took them he said, 'Just wait for this letter.'

He scrawled with ease, and the brief note was quickly addressed. 'Let Hutchins go with it at once, will you?' said Grandcourt, pushing the letter away from him.

As Lush had expected, it was addressed to Miss Harleth, Offendene. When his irritation had cooled down he was glad there had been no explosive quarrel; but he felt sure that there was a notch made against him, and that somehow or other he was intended to pay. It was also clear to him that the immediate effect of his revelation had been to harden Grandcourt's previous determination. But as to the particular movements which

made this process in his baffling mind, Lush could only toss up his chin in despair of a theory.

Chapter Twenty-Six

He brings white asses laden with the freight
Of Tyrian vessels, purple, gold, and balm,
To bribe my will: I'll bid them chase him forth,
Nor let him breathe the taint of his surmise
On my secure resolve.

Ay, 'tis secure;

And therefore let him come to spread his freight.
For firmness hath its appetite and craves
The stronger lure, more strongly to resist;
Would know the touch of gold to fling it off;
Scent wine to feel its lip the soberer;
Behold soft byssus, ivory, and plumes
To say, 'They're fair, but I will none of them,'
And flout Enticement in the very face.

Mr Gascoigne one day came to Offendene with what he felt to be the satisfactory news that Mrs Mompert had fixed Tuesday in the following week for her interview with Gwendolen at Wanchester. He said nothing of his having incidentally heard that Mr Grandcourt had returned to Diplow; knowing no more than she did that Leubronn had been the goal of her admirer's journeying, and feeling that it would be unkind uselessly to revive the memory of a brilliant prospect under the present reverses. In his secret soul he thought of his niece's unintelligible caprice with regret, but he vindicated her to himself by considering that Grandcourt had been the first to behave oddly, in suddenly walking away when there had been the best opportunity for crowning his marked attentions. The Rector's practical judgment told him that his chief duty to his niece now was to encourage her resolutely to face the change in her lot, since there was no manifest promise of any event that would avert it.

'You will find an interest in varied experience, my dear, and I have no doubt you will be a more valuable woman for having sustained such a part as you are called to.'

'I cannot pretend to believe that I shall like it,' said Gwendolen, for the first time showing her uncle some petulance. 'But I am quite aware that I am obliged to bear it.'

She remembered having submitted to his admonition on a different occasion, when she was expected to like a very different prospect.

'And your good sense will teach you to behave suitably under it,' said Mr Gascoigne, with a shade more gravity. 'I feel sure that Mrs Mompert will be pleased with you. You will know how to conduct yourself to a woman who holds in all senses the relation of superior to you. This trouble has come on you young, but that makes it in some respects easier, and there is benefit in all chastisement if we adjust our minds to it.'

This was precisely what Gwendolen was unable to do; and after her uncle was gone, the bitter tears, which had rarely come during the late trouble, rose and fell slowly as she sat alone. Her heart denied that the trouble was easier because she was young. When was she to have any happiness, if it did not come while she was young? Not that her visions of possible happiness for herself were as unmixed with necessary evil as they used to be – not that she could still imagine herself plucking the fruits of life without suspicion of their core. But this general disenchantment with the world – nay, with herself, since it appeared that she was not made for easy pre-eminence – only intensified her sense of forlorness: it was a visibly sterile distance enclosing the dreary path at her feet, in which she had no courage to tread. She was in that first crisis of passionate youthful rebellion against what is not fitly called pain, but rather the absence of joy – that first rage of disappointment in life's morning, which we whom the years have subdued are apt to remember but dimly as part of our own experience, and so to be intolerant of its self-enclosed unreasonableness and impiety. What passion seems more absurd, when we have got outside it and looked at calamity as a collective risk, than this amazed anguish that I and not Thou, He, or She, should be just the smitten one? Yet perhaps some who have afterwards made themselves a willing fence before the breast of another, and have carried their own heart-wound in heroic silence – some who have made their latter deeds great, nevertheless began with this angry amazement at their own smart, and on the mere denial of their fantastic desires raged as if under the sting of wasps which reduced the universe for them to an unjust infliction of pain. This was nearly poor Gwendolen's

condition. What though such a reverse as hers had often happened to other girls? The one point she had been all her life learning to care for was, that it had happened to *her*. It was what *she* felt under Klesmer's demonstration that she was not remarkable enough to command fortune by force of will and merit; it was what *she* would feel under the rigours of Mrs Mompert's constant expectation, under the dull demand that she should be cheerful with three Miss Momperts, under the necessity of showing herself entirely submissive, and keeping her thoughts to herself. To be a queen disthroned is not so hard as some other down-stepping: imagine one who had been made to believe in his own divinity finding all homage withdrawn, and himself unable to perform a miracle that would recall the homage and restore his own confidence. Something akin to this illusion and this helplessness had befallen the poor spoiled child, with the lovely lips and eyes and the majestic figure – which seemed now to have no magic in them.

She rose from the low ottoman where she had been sitting purposeless, and walked up and down the drawing-room, resting her elbow on one palm while she leaned down her cheek on the other, and a slow tear fell. She thought, 'I have always, ever since I was little, felt that mamma was not a happy woman; and now I daresay I shall be more unhappy than she has been.' Her mind dwelt for a few moments on the picture of herself losing her youth and ceasing to enjoy – not minding whether she did this or that: but such picturing inevitably brought back the image of her mother. 'Poor mamma! it will be still worse for her now. I can get a little money for her – that is all I shall care about now.' And then with an entirely new movement of her imagination, she saw her mother getting quite old and white, and herself no longer young but faded, and their two faces meeting still with memory and love, and she knowing what was in her mother's mind – 'Poor Gwen too is sad and faded now' – and then for the first time she sobbed, not in anger but with a sort of tender misery.

Her face was towards the door, and she saw her mother enter. She barely saw that; for her eyes were large with tears, and she pressed her handkerchief against them hurriedly. Before she took it away she felt her mother's arms round her, and this sensation, which seemed a prolongation of her inward vision, overcame her will to be reticent: she sobbed anew in spite of herself, as they pressed their cheeks together.

Mrs Davilow had brought something in her hand which had already caused her an agitating anxiety, and she dared not speak until her darling had become calmer. But Gwendolen, with whom weeping had always been a painful manifestation to be resisted if possible, again pressed her handkerchief against her eyes, and with a deep breath drew her head backward and looked at her mother, who was pale and tremulous.

'It was nothing, mamma,' said Gwendolen, thinking that her mother had been moved in this way simply by finding her in distress. 'It is all over now.'

But Mrs Davilow had withdrawn her arms, and Gwendolen perceived a letter in her hand.

'What is that letter? – worse news still?' she asked, with a touch of bitterness.

'I don't know what you will think it, dear,' said Mrs Davilow, keeping the letter in her hand. 'You will hardly guess where it comes from.'

'Don't ask me to guess anything,' said Gwendolen, rather impatiently, as if a bruise were being pressed.

'It is addressed to you, dear.'

Gwendolen gave the slightest perceptible toss of the head.

'It comes from Diplow,' said Mrs Davilow, giving her the letter.

She knew Grandcourt's indistinct handwriting, and her mother was not surprised to see her blush deeply; but watching her as she read, and wondering much what was the purport of the letter, she saw the colour die out. Gwendolen's lips even were pale as she turned the open note towards her mother. The words were few and formal.

> 'Mr Grandcourt presents his compliments to Miss Harleth, and begs to know whether he may be permitted to call at Offendene tomorrow after two, and to see her alone. Mr Grandcourt has just returned from Leubronn, where he had hoped to find Miss Harleth.'

Mrs Davilow read, and then looked at her daughter inquiringly, leaving the note in her hand. Gwendolen let it fall on the floor, and turned away.

'It must be answered, darling,' said Mrs Davilow, timidly. 'The man waits.'

Gwendolen sank on the settee, clasped her hands, and looked straight before her, not at her mother. She had the expression of one who had been startled by a sound and was listening to know what would come of it. The sudden change of the situation was bewildering. A few minutes before she was looking along an inescapable path of repulsive monotony, with hopeless inward rebellion against the imperious lot which left her no choice: and lo, now, a moment of choice was come. Yet – was it triumph she felt most or terror? Impossible for Gwendolen not to feel some triumph in a tribute to her power at a time when she was first tasting the bitterness of insignificance: again she seemed to be getting a sort of empire over her own life. But how to use it? Here came the terror. Quick, quick, like pictures in a book beaten open with a sense of hurry, came back vividly, yet in fragments, all that she had gone through in relation to Grandcourt – the allurements,

the vacillations, the resolve to accede, the final repulsion; the incisive face of that dark-eyed lady with the lovely boy; her own pledge (was it a pledge not to marry him?) – the new disbelief in the worth of men and things for which that scene of disclosure had become a symbol. That unalterable experience made a vision at which in the first agitated moment, before tempering reflections could suggest themselves, her native terror shrank.

Where was the good of choice coming again? What did she wish? Anything different? No! and yet in the dark seed-growths of consciousness a new wish was forming itself – 'I wish I had never known it!' Something, anything she wished for that would have saved her from the dread to let Grandcourt come.

It was no long while – yet it seemed long to Mrs Davilow, before she thought it well to say, gently –

'It will be necessary for you to write, dear. Or shall I write an answer for you – which you will dictate?'

'No, mamma,' said Gwendolen, drawing a deep breath. 'But please lay me out the pen and paper.'

That was gaining time. Was she to decline Grandcourt's visit – close the shutters – not even look out on what would happen? – though with the assurance that she should remain just where she was? The young activity within her made a warm current through her terror and stirred towards something that would be an event – towards an opportunity in which she could look and speak with the former effectiveness. The interest of the morrow was no longer at a dead-lock.

'There is really no reason on earth why you should be so alarmed at the man's waiting a few minutes, mamma,' said Gwendolen, remonstrantly, as Mrs Davilow, having prepared the writing materials, looked towards her expectantly. 'Servants expect nothing else than to wait. It is not to be supposed that I must write on the instant.'

'No, dear,' said Mrs Davilow, in the tone of one corrected, turning to sit down and take up a bit of work that lay at hand; 'he can wait another quarter of an hour, if you like.'

It was very simple speech and action on her part, but it was what might have been subtly calculated. Gwendolen felt a contradictory desire to be hastened: hurry would save her from deliberate choice.

'I did not mean him to wait long enough for that needlework to be finished,' she said, lifting her hands to stroke the backward curves of her hair, while she rose from her seat and stood still.

'But if you don't feel able to decide?' said Mrs Davilow, sympathisingly.

'I *must* decide,' said Gwendolen, walking to the writing-table and seating herself. All the while there was a busy undercurrent in her, like the thought of a man who keeps up a dialogue while he is considering how he can slip away. Why should she not let him come? It bound her to nothing. He had been to Leubronn after her: of course he meant a direct unmistakeable renewal of the suit which before had been only implied. What then? She could reject him. Why was she to deny herself the freedom of doing this – which she would like to do?

'If Mr Grandcourt has only just returned from Leubronn,' said Mrs Davilow, observing that Gwendolen leaned back in her chair after taking the pen in her hand – 'I wonder whether he has heard of our misfortunes.'

'That could make no difference to a man in his position,' said Gwendolen, rather contemptuously.

'It would, to some men,' said Mrs Davilow. 'They would not like to take a wife from a family in a state of beggary almost, as we are. Here we are at Offendene with a great shell over us as usual. But just imagine his finding us at Sawyer's Cottage. Most men are afraid of being bored or taxed by a wife's family. If Mr Grandcourt did know, I think it a strong proof of his attachment to you.'

Mrs Davilow spoke with unusual emphasis: it was the first time she had ventured to say anything about Grandcourt which would necessarily seem intended as an argument in favour of him, her habitual impression being that such arguments would certainly be useless and might be worse. The effect of her words now was stronger than she could imagine: they raised a new set of possibilities in Gwendolen's mind – a vision of what Grandcourt might do for her mother if she, Gwendolen, did – what she was not going to do. She was so moved by a new rush of ideas, that like one conscious of being urgently called away, she felt that the immediate task must be hastened: the letter must be written, else it might be endlessly deferred. After all, she acted in a hurry as she had wished to do. To act in a hurry was to have a reason for keeping away from an absolute decision, and to leave open as many issues as possible.

She wrote: 'Miss Harleth presents her compliments to Mr Grandcourt. She will be at home after two o'clock to-morrow.'

Before addressing the note she said, 'Pray ring the bell, mamma, if there is any one to answer it.' She really did not know who did the work of the house.

It was not till after the letter had been taken away and Gwendolen had risen again, stretching out one arm and then resting it on her head, with a long moan which had a sound of relief in it, that Mrs Davilow ventured to ask –

'What did you say, Gwen?'

‘I said that I should be at home,’ answered Gwendolen, rather loftily. Then, after a pause, ‘You must not expect, because Mr Grandcourt is coming, that anything is going to happen, mamma.’

‘I don’t allow myself to expect anything, dear. I desire you to follow your own feeling. You have never told me what that was.’

‘What is the use of telling?’ said Gwendolen, hearing a reproach in that true statement. ‘When I have anything pleasant to tell, you may be sure I will tell you.’

‘But Mr Grandcourt will consider that you have already accepted him, in allowing him to come. His note tells you plainly enough that he is coming to make you an offer.’

‘Very well; and I wish to have the pleasure of refusing him.’

Mrs Davilow looked up in wonderment, but Gwendolen implied her wish not to be questioned further by saying –

‘Put down that detestable needlework, and let us walk in the avenue. I am stifled.’

Chapter Twenty-Seven

> Desire has trimmed the sails, and Circumstance
> Brings but the breeze to fill them.

While Grandcourt on his beautiful black Yarico, the groom behind him on Criterion, was taking the pleasant ride from Diplow to Offendene, Gwendolen was seated before the mirror while her mother gathered up the lengthy mass of light-brown hair which she had been carefully brushing.

'Only gather it up easily and make a coil, mamma,' said Gwendolen.

'Let me bring you some ear-rings, Gwen,' said Mrs Davilow, when the hair was adjusted, and they were both looking at the reflection in the glass. It was impossible for them not to notice that the eyes looked brighter than they had done of late, that there seemed to be a shadow lifted from the face, leaving all the lines once more in their placid youthfulness. The mother drew some inferences that made her voice rather cheerful. 'You do want your ear-rings?'

'No, mamma; I shall not wear any ornaments, and I shall put on my black silk. Black is the only wear when one is going to refuse an offer,' said Gwendolen, with one of her old smiles at her mother, while she rose to throw off her dressing-gown.

'Suppose the offer is not made after all,' said Mrs Davilow, not without a sly intention.

'Then that will be because I refuse it beforehand,' said Gwendolen. 'It comes to the same thing.'

There was a proud little toss of her head as she said this; and when she walked down-stairs in her long black robes, there was just that firm poise of head and elasticity of form which had lately been missing, as in a parched plant. Her mother thought, 'She is quite herself again. It must be pleasure in his coming. Can her mind be really made up against him?'

Gwendolen would have been rather angry if that thought had been uttered; perhaps all the more because through the last twenty hours, with a brief interruption of sleep, she had been so occupied with perpetually alternating images and arguments for and against the possibility of her marrying Grandcourt, that the conclusion which she had determined on beforehand ceased to have any hold on her consciousness: the alternate dip of counterbalancing thoughts begotten of counterbalancing desires had brought her into a state in which no conclusion could look fixed to her. She would have expressed her resolve as before; but it was a form out of which the blood had been sucked – no more a part of quivering life than the 'God's will be done' of one who is eagerly watching chances. She did not mean to accept Grandcourt; from the first moment of receiving his letter she had meant to refuse him; still, that could not but prompt her to look the unwelcome reasons full in the face until she had a little less awe of them, could not hinder her imagination from filling out her knowledge in various ways, some of which seemed to change the aspect of what she knew. By dint of looking at a dubious object with a constructive imagination, one can give it twenty different shapes. Her indistinct grounds of hesitation before the interview at the Whispering Stones, at present counted for nothing; they were all merged in the final repulsion. If it had not been for that day in Cardell Chase, she said to herself now, there would have been no obstacle to her marrying Grandcourt. On that day and after it, she had not reasoned and balanced: she had acted with a force of impulse against which all questioning was no more than a voice against a torrent. The impulse had come – not only from her maidenly pride and jealousy, not only from the shock of another woman's calamity thrust close on her vision, but – from her dread of wrong-doing, which was vague, it is true, and aloof from the daily details of her life, but not the less strong. Whatever was accepted as consistent with being a lady she had no scruple about; but from the dim region of what was called disgraceful, wrong, guilty, she shrank with mingled pride and terror; and even apart from shame, her feeling would have made her place any deliberate injury of another in the region of guilt.

But now – did she know exactly what was the state of the case with regard to Mrs Glasher and her children? She had given a sort of promise – had said, 'I will not interfere with your wishes.' But would another woman who married Grandcourt be in fact the decisive obstacle to her wishes, or be doing her and her boy any real injury? Might it not be just as well, nay better, that Grandcourt should marry? For what could not a woman do when she was married, if she knew how to assert herself? Here all was constructive imagination. Gwendolen had about as accurate a conception of marriage – that is to say, of the mutual influences,

demands, duties of man and woman in the state of matrimony – as she had of magnetic currents and the law of storms.

'Mamma managed badly,' was her way of summing up what she had seen of her mother's experience: she herself would manage quite differently. And the trials of matrimony were the last theme into which Mrs Davilow could choose to enter fully with this daughter.

'I wonder what mamma and my uncle would say if they knew about Mrs Glasher!' thought Gwendolen, in her inward debating; not that she could imagine herself telling them, even if she had not felt bound to silence. 'I wonder what anybody would say; or what they would say to Mr Grandcourt's marrying some one else and having other children!' To consider what 'anybody' would say, was to be released from the difficulty of judging where everything was obscure to her when feeling had ceased to be decisive. She had only to collect her memories, which proved to her that 'anybody' regarded illegitimate children as more rightfully to be looked shy on and deprived of social advantages than illegitimate fathers. The verdict of 'anybody' seemed to be that she had no reason to concern herself greatly on behalf of Mrs Glasher and her children.

But there was another way in which they had caused her concern. What others might think, could not do away with a feeling which in the first instance would hardly be too strongly described as indignation and loathing that she should have been expected to unite herself with an outworn life, full of backward secrets which must have been more keenly felt than any associations with *her*. True, the question of love on her own part had occupied her scarcely at all in relation to Grandcourt. The desirability of marriage for her had always seemed due to other feelings than love; and to be enamoured was the part of the man, on whom the advances depended. Gwendolen had found no objection to Grandcourt's way of being enamoured before she had had that glimpse of his past, which she resented as if it had been a deliberate offence against her. His advances to *her* were deliberate, and she felt a retrospective disgust for them. Perhaps other men's lives were of the same kind – full of secrets which made the ignorant suppositions of the woman they wanted to marry a farce at which they were laughing in their sleeves.

These feelings of disgust and indignation had sunk deep; and though other troublous experience in the last weeks had dulled them from passion into remembrance, it was chiefly their reverberating activity which kept her firm to the understanding with herself, that she was not going to accept Grandcourt. She had never meant to form a new determination; she had only been considering what might be thought or said. If anything could have induced her to change, it would have been the prospect of making all things easy for 'poor mamma:' that, she admitted, was a temptation. But no! she was going to refuse him. Meanwhile, the thought that he was coming to be refused was inspiriting: she had the white reins in her hands again; there was a new current in her frame, reviving her from the beaten-down consciousness in which she had been left by the interview with Klesmer. She was not now going to crave an opinion of her capabilities; she was going to exercise her power.

Was this what made her heart palpitate annoyingly when she heard the horse's footsteps on the gravel? – when Miss Merry, who opened the door to Grandcourt, came to tell her that he was in the drawing-room? The hours of preparation and the triumph of the situation were apparently of no use: she might as well have seen Grandcourt coming suddenly on her in the midst of her despondency. While walking into the drawing-room she had to concentrate all her energy in that self-control which made her appear gravely gracious as she gave her hand to him, and answered his hope that she was quite well in a voice as low and languid as his own. A moment afterwards, when they were both of them seated on two of the wreath-painted chairs – Gwendolen upright with downcast eyelids, Grandcourt about two yards distant, leaning one arm over the back of his chair and looking at her, while he held his hat in his left hand – any one seeing them as a picture would have concluded that they were in some stage of love-making suspense. And certainly the love-making had begun: she already felt herself being wooed by this silent man seated at an agreeable distance, with the subtlest atmosphere of atta of roses and an attention bent wholly on her. And he also considered himself to be wooing: he was not a man to suppose that his presence carried no consequences; and he was exactly the man to feel the utmost piquancy in a girl whom he had not found quite calculable.

'I was disappointed not to find you at Leubronn,' he began, his usual broken drawl having just a shade of amorous languor in it. 'The place was intolerable without you. A mere kennel of a place. Don't you think so?'

'I can't judge what it would be without myself,' said Gwendolen, turning her eyes on him, with some recovered sense of mischief. '*With* myself I liked it well enough to have stayed longer, if I could. But I was obliged to come home on account of family troubles.'

'It was very cruel of you to go to Leubronn,' said Grandcourt, taking no notice of the troubles, on which Gwendolen – she hardly knew why – wished that there should be a clear understanding at once. 'You must have known that it would spoil everything: you knew you were the heart and soul of everything that went on. Are you quite reckless about me?'

It was impossible to say 'yes' in a tone that would be taken seriously; equally impossible to say 'no;' but

what else could she say? In her difficulty, she turned down her eyelids again and blushed over face and neck. Grandcourt saw her in a new phase, and believed that she was showing her inclination. But he was determined that she should show it more decidedly.

'Perhaps there is some deeper interest? Some attraction – some engagement – which it would have been only fair to make me aware of? Is there any man who stands between us?'

Inwardly the answer framed itself, 'No; but there is a woman.' Yet how could she utter this? Even if she had not promised that woman to be silent, it would have been impossible for her to enter on the subject with Grandcourt. But how could she arrest this wooing by beginning to make a formal speech – 'I perceive your intention – it is most flattering, &c.'? A fish honestly invited to come and be eaten has a clear course in declining, but how if it finds itself swimming against a net? And apart from the network, would she have dared at once to say anything decisive? Gwendolen had not time to be clear on that point. As it was, she felt compelled to silence, and after a pause, Grandcourt said –

'Am I to understand that some one else is preferred?'

Gwendolen, now impatient of her own embarrassment, determined to rush at the difficulty and free herself. She raised her eyes again and said with something of her former clearness and defiance, 'No' – wishing him to understand, 'What then? I may not be ready to take *you*.' There was nothing that Grandcourt could not understand which he perceived likely to affect his *amour propre*.

'The last thing I would do, is to importune you. I should not hope to win you by making myself a bore. If there were no hope for me, I would ask you to tell me so at once, that I might just ride away to – no matter where.'

Almost to her own astonishment, Gwendolen felt a sudden alarm at the image of Grandcourt finally riding away. What would be left her then? Nothing but the former dreariness. She liked him to be there. She snatched at the subject that would defer any decisive answer.

'I fear you are not aware of what has happened to us. I have lately had to think so much of my mamma's troubles, that other subjects have been quite thrown into the background. She has lost all her fortune, and we are going to leave this place. I must ask you to excuse my seeming preoccupied.'

In eluding a direct appeal Gwendolen recovered some of her self-possession. She spoke with dignity and looked straight at Grandcourt, whose long, narrow, impenetrable eyes met hers, and mysteriously arrested them: mysteriously; for the subtly-varied drama between man and woman is often such as can hardly be rendered in words put together like dominoes, according to obvious fixed marks. The word of all work Love will no more express the myriad modes of mutual attraction, than the word Thought can inform you what is passing through your neighbour's mind. It would be hard to tell on which side – Gwendolen's or Grandcourt's – the influence was more mixed. At that moment his strongest wish was to be completely master of this creature – this piquant combination of maidenliness and mischief: that she knew things which had made her start away from him, spurred him to triumph over that repugnance; and he was believing that he should triumph. And she – ah, piteous equality in the need to dominate! – she was overcome like the thirsty one who is drawn towards the seeming water in the desert, overcome by the suffused sense that here in this man's homage to her lay the rescue from helpless subjection to an oppressive lot.

All the while they were looking at each other; and Grandcourt said, slowly and languidly, as if it were of no importance, other things having been settled –

'You will tell me now, I hope, that Mrs Davilow's loss of fortune will not trouble you further. You will trust me to prevent it from weighing upon her. You will give me the claim to provide against that.'

The little pauses and refined drawlings with which this speech was uttered, gave time for Gwendolen to go through the dream of a life. As the words penetrated her, they had the effect of a draught of wine, which suddenly makes all things easier, desirable things not so wrong, and people in general less disagreeable. She had a momentary phantasmal love for this man who chose his words so well, and who was a mere incarnation of delicate homage. Repugnance, dread, scruples – these were dim as remembered pains, while she was already tasting relief under the immediate pain of hopelessness. She imagined herself already springing to her mother, and being playful again. Yet when Grandcourt had ceased to speak, there was an instant in which she was conscious of being at the turning of the ways.

'You are very generous,' she said, not moving her eyes, and speaking with a gentle intonation.

'You accept what will make such things a matter of course?' said Grandcourt, without any new eagerness. 'You consent to become my wife?'

This time Gwendolen remained quite pale. Something made her rise from her seat in spite of herself and walk to a little distance. Then she turned and with her hands folded before her stood in silence.

Grandcourt immediately rose too, resting his hat on the chair, but still keeping hold of it. The evident hesitation of this destitute girl to take his splendid offer stung him into a keenness of interest such as he had not known for years. None the less because he attributed her hesitation entirely to her knowledge about Mrs

Glasher. In that attitude of preparation, he said –

'Do you command me to go?' No familiar spirit could have suggested to him more effective words.

'No,' said Gwendolen. She could not let him go: that negative was a clutch. She seemed to herself to be, after all, only drifted towards the tremendous decision: – but drifting depends on something besides the currents, when the sails have been set beforehand.

'You accept my devotion?' said Grandcourt, holding his hat by his side and looking straight into her eyes, without other movement. Their eyes meeting in that way seemed to allow any length of pause; but wait as long as she would, how could she contradict herself? What had she detained him for? He had shut out any explanation.

'Yes,' came as gravely from Gwendolen's lips as if she had been answering to her name in a court of justice. He received it gravely, and they still looked at each other in the same attitude. Was there ever before such a way of accepting the bliss-giving 'Yes'? Grandcourt liked better to be at that distance from her, and to feel under a ceremony imposed by an indefinable prohibition that breathed from Gwendolen's bearing.

But he did at length lay down his hat and advance to take her hand, just pressing his lips upon it and letting it go again. She thought his behaviour perfect, and gained a sense of freedom which made her almost ready to be mischievous. Her 'Yes' entailed so little at this moment, that there was nothing to screen the reversal of her gloomy prospects: her vision was filled by her own release from the Momperts, and her mother's release from Sawyer's Cottage. With a happy curl of the lips, she said –

'Will you not see mamma? I will fetch her.'

'Let us wait a little,' said Grandcourt, in his favourite attitude, having his left forefinger and thumb in his waistcoat-pocket, and with his right caressing his whisker, while he stood near Gwendolen and looked at her – not unlike a gentleman who has a felicitous introduction at an evening party.

'Have you anything else to say to me?' said Gwendolen, playfully.

'Yes – I know having things said to you is a great bore,' said Grandcourt, rather sympathetically.

'Not when they are things I like to hear.'

'Will it bother you to be asked how soon we can be married?'

'I think it will, to-day,' said Gwendolen, putting up her chin saucily.

'Not to-day, then, but to-morrow. Think of it before I come tomorrow. In a fortnight – or three weeks – as soon as possible.'

'Ah, you think you will be tired of my company,' said Gwendolen. 'I notice when people are married the husband is not so much with his wife as when they were engaged. But perhaps I shall like that better too.'

She laughed charmingly.

'You shall have whatever you like,' said Grandcourt.

'And nothing that I don't like? – please say that; because I think I dislike what I don't like more than I like what I like,' said Gwendolen, finding herself in the woman's paradise where all her nonsense is adorable.

Grandcourt paused: these were subtilties in which he had much experience of his own. 'I don't know – this is such a brute of a world, things are always turning up that one doesn't like. I can't always hinder your being bored. If you like to hunt Criterion, I can't hinder his coming down by some chance or other.'

'Ah, my friend Criterion, how is he?'

'He is outside: I made the groom ride him, that you might see him. He had the side-saddle on for an hour or two yesterday. Come to the window and look at him.'

They could see the two horses being taken slowly round the sweep, and the beautiful creatures, in their fine grooming, sent a thrill of exultation through Gwendolen. They were the symbols of command and luxury, in delightful contrast with the ugliness of poverty and humiliation at which she had lately been looking close.

'Will you ride Criterion to-morrow?' said Grandcourt. 'If you will, everything shall be arranged.'

'I should like it of all things,' said Gwendolen. 'I want to lose myself in a gallop again. But now I must go and fetch mamma.'

'Take my arm to the door, then,' said Grandcourt, and she accepted. Their faces were very near each other, being almost on a level, and he was looking at her. She thought his manners as a lover more agreeable than any she had seen described. She had no alarm lest he meant to kiss her, and was so much at her ease, that she suddenly paused in the middle of the room and said, half archly, half earnestly –

'Oh, while I think of it – there is something I dislike that you can save me from. I do *not* like Mr Lush's company.'

'You shall not have it. I'll get rid of him.'

'You are not fond of him yourself?'

'Not in the least. I let him hang on me because he has always been a poor devil,' said Grandcourt, in an *adagio* of utter indifference. 'They got him to travel with me when I was a lad. He was always that coarse-haired kind of brute – a sort of cross between a hog and a *dilettante*.'

Gwendolen laughed. All that seemed kind and natural enough: Grandcourt's fastidiousness enhanced the kindness. And when they reached the door, his way of opening it for her was the perfection of easy homage. Really, she thought, he was likely to be the least disagreeable of husbands.

Mrs Davilow was waiting anxiously in her bedroom when Gwendolen entered, stepped towards her quickly and kissing her on both cheeks said in a low tone, 'Come down, mamma, and see Mr Grandcourt. I am engaged to him.'

'My darling child!' said Mrs Davilow, with a surprise that was rather solemn than glad.

'Yes,' said Gwendolen, in the same tone, and with a quickness which implied that it was needless to ask questions. 'Everything is settled. You are not going to Sawyer's Cottage, I am not going to be inspected by Mrs Mompert, and everything is to be as I like. So come down with me immediately.'

BOOK FOUR

Gwendolen Gets Her Choice

Chapter Twenty-Eight

> Il est plus aisé de connoître l'homme en général que de connoître un homme en particulier.
>
> – LA ROCHEFOUCAULD[10]

An hour after Grandcourt had left, the important news of Gwendolen's engagement was known at the Rectory, and Mr and Mrs Gascoigne, with Anna, spent the evening at Offendene.

'My dear, let me congratulate you on having created a strong attachment,' said the Rector. 'You look serious, and I don't wonder at it: a lifelong union is a solemn thing. But from the way Mr Grandcourt has acted and spoken I think we may already see some good arising out of our adversity. It has given you an opportunity of observing your future husband's delicate liberality.'

Mr Gascoigne referred to Grandcourt's mode of implying that he would provide for Mrs Davilow – a part of the love-making which Gwendolen had remembered to cite to her mother with perfect accuracy.

'But I have no doubt that Mr Grandcourt would have behaved quite as handsomely if you had not gone away to Germany, Gwendolen, and had been engaged to him, as you no doubt might have been, more than a month ago,' said Mrs Gascoigne, feeling that she had to discharge a duty on this occasion. 'But now there is no more room for caprice; indeed, I trust you have no inclination to any. A woman has a great debt of gratitude to a man who perseveres in making her such an offer. But no doubt you feel properly.'

'I am not all sure that I do, aunt,' said Gwendolen, with saucy gravity. 'I don't know everything it is proper to feel on being engaged.'

The Rector patted her shoulder and smiled as at a bit of innocent naughtiness, and his wife took his behaviour as an indication that she was not to be displeased. As for Anna, she kissed Gwendolen and said, 'I do hope you will be happy,' but then sank into the background and tried to keep the tears back too. In the late days she had been imagining a little romance about Rex – how if he still longed for Gwendolen her heart might be softened by trouble into love, so that they could by-and-by be married. And the romance had turned to a prayer that she, Anna, might be able to rejoice like a good sister, and only think of being useful in working for Gwendolen, as long as Rex was not rich. But now she wanted grace to rejoice in something else. Miss Merry and the four girls, Alice with the high shoulders, Bertha and Fanny the whisperers, and Isabel the listener, were all present on this family occasion, when everything seemed appropriately turning to the honour and glory of Gwendolen, and real life was as interesting as 'Sir Charles Grandison.' The evening passed chiefly in decisive remarks from the Rector, in answer to conjectures from the two elder ladies. According to him, the case was not one in which he could think it his duty to mention settlements: everything must, and doubtless would safely be left to Mr Grandcourt.

'I should like to know exactly what sort of places Ryelands and Gadsmere are,' said Mrs Davilow.

'Gadsmere, I believe, is a secondary place,' said Mr Gascoigne; 'But Ryelands I know to be one of our finest seats. The park is extensive and the woods of a very valuable order. The house was built by Inigo Jones, and the ceilings are painted in the Italian style. The estate is said to be worth twelve thousand a-year, and there are two livings, one a rectory, in the gift of the Grandcourts. There may be some burthens on the land. Still, Mr Grandcourt was an only child.'

'It would be most remarkable,' said Mrs Gascoigne, 'if he were to become Lord Stannery in addition to everything else. Only think: there is the Grandcourt estate, the Mallinger estate, *and* the baronetcy, *and* the peerage,' – she was marking off the items on her fingers, and paused on the fourth while she added, 'but they say there will be no land coming to him with the peerage.' It seemed a pity there was nothing for the fifth finger.

'The peerage,' said the Rector, judiciously, 'must be regarded as a remote chance. There are two cousins between the present peer and Mr Grandcourt. It is certainly a serious reflection how death and other causes do sometimes concentrate inheritances on one man. But an excess of that kind is to be deprecated. To be Sir Mallinger Grandcourt Mallinger – I suppose that will be his style – with the corresponding properties, is a valuable talent enough for any man to have committed to him. Let us hope it will be well used.'

'And what a position for the wife, Gwendolen!' said Mrs Gascoigne; 'a great responsibility indeed. But you must lose no time in writing to Mrs Mompert, Henry. It is a good thing that you have an engagement of

marriage to offer as an excuse, else she might feel offended. She is rather a high woman.'

'I am rid of that horror,' thought Gwendolen, to whom the name of Mompert had become a sort of Mumbo-jumbo. She was very silent through the evening, and that night could hardly sleep at all in her little white bed. It was a rarity in her strong youth to be wakeful; and perhaps a still greater rarity for her to be careful that her mother should not know of her restlessness. But her state of mind was altogether new: she who had been used to feel sure of herself, and ready to manage others, had just taken a decisive step which she had beforehand thought that she would not take – nay, perhaps, was bound not to take. She could not go backward now; she liked a great deal of what lay before her; and there was nothing for her to like if she went back. But her resolution was dogged by the shadow of that previous resolve which had at first come as the undoubting movement of her whole being. While she lay on her pillow with wide-open eyes, 'looking on darkness which the blind do see,' she was appalled by the idea that she was going to do what she had once started away from with repugnance. It was new to her that a question of right or wrong in her conduct should rouse her terror; she had known no compunction that atoning caresses and presents could not lay to rest. But here had come a moment when something like a new consciousness was awaked. She seemed on the edge of adopting deliberately, as a notion for all the rest of her life, what she had rashly said in her bitterness, when her discovery had driven her away to Leubronn: – that it did not signify what she did; she had only to amuse herself as best she could. That lawlessness, that casting away of all care for justification, suddenly frightened her: it came to her with the shadowy array of possible calamity behind it – calamity which had ceased to be a mere name for her; and all the infiltrated influences of disregarded religious teaching, as well as the deeper impressions of something awful and inexorable enveloping her, seemed to concentrate themselves in the vague conception of avenging power. The brilliant position she had longed for, the imagined freedom she would create for herself in marriage, the deliverance from the dull insignificance of her girlhood – all were immediately before her; and yet they had come to her hunger like food with the taint of sacrilege upon it, which she must snatch with terror. In the darkness and loneliness of her little bed, her more resistant self could not act against the first onslaught of dread after her irrevocable decision. That unhappy-faced woman and her children – Grandcourt and his relations with her – kept repeating themselves in her imagination like the clinging memory of a disgrace, and gradually obliterated all other thought, leaving only the consciousness that she had taken those scenes into her life. Her long wakefulness seemed a delirium; a faint, faint light penetrated beside the window-curtain; the chillness increased. She could bear it no longer, and cried 'Mamma!'

'Yes, dear,' said Mrs Davilow, immediately, in a wakeful voice.

'Let me come to you.'

She soon went to sleep on her mother's shoulder, and slept on till late, when, dreaming of a lit-up ball-room, she opened her eyes on her mother standing by the bedside with a small packet in her hand.

'I am sorry to wake you, darling, but I thought it better to give you this at once. The groom has brought Criterion; he has come on another horse, and says he is to stay here.'

Gwendolen sat up in bed and opened the packet. It was a delicate little enamelled casket, and inside was a splendid diamond ring with a letter which contained a folded bit of coloured paper and these words: –

> 'Pray wear this ring when I come at twelve in sign of our betrothal. I enclose a cheque drawn in the name of Mr Gascoigne, for immediate expenses. Of course Mrs Davilow will remain at Offendene, at least for some time. I hope, when I come, you will have granted me an early day, when you may begin to command me at a shorter distance. – Yours devotedly,
> H.M. Grandcourt'

The cheque was for five hundred pounds, and Gwendolen turned it towards her mother, with the letter.

'How very kind and delicate!' said Mrs Davilow, with much feeling. 'But I really should like better not to be dependent on a son-in-law. I and the girls could get along very well.'

'Mamma,' if you say that again, I will not marry him,' said Gwendolen, angrily.

'My dear child, I trust you are not going to marry only for my sake,' said Mrs Davilow, deprecatingly.

Gwendolen tossed her head on the pillow away from her mother, and let the ring lie. She was irritated at this attempt to take away a motive. Perhaps the deeper cause of her irritation was the consciousness that she was not going to marry solely for her mamma's sake – that she was drawn towards the marriage in ways against which stronger reasons than her mother's renunciation were yet not strong enough to hinder her. She had waked up to the signs that she was irrevocably engaged, and all the ugly visions, the alarms, the arguments of the night, must be met by daylight, in which probably they would show themselves weak.

'What I long for is your happiness, dear,' continued Mrs Davilow, pleadingly. 'I will not say anything to vex you. Will you not put on the ring?'

For a few moments Gwendolen did not answer, but her thoughts were active. At last she raised herself with a determination to do as she would do if she had started on horseback, and go on with spirit, whatever ideas might be running in her head.

‘I thought the lover always put on the betrothal ring himself,’ she said, laughingly, slipping the ring on her finger, and looking at it with a charming movement of her head. ‘I know why he has sent it,’ she added, nodding at her mamma.

‘Why?’

‘He would rather make me put it on than ask me to let him do it. Aha! he is very proud. But so am I. We shall match each other. I should hate a man who went down on his knees, and came fawning on me. He really is not disgusting.’

‘That is very moderate praise, Gwen.’

‘No, it is not, for a man,’ said Gwendolen, gaily. ‘But now I must get up and dress. Will you come and do my hair, mamma, dear,’ she went on, drawing down her mamma’s face to caress it with her own cheeks, ‘and not be so naughty any more as to talk of living in poverty? You must bear to be made comfortable, even if you don’t like it. And Mr Grandcourt behaves perfectly, now, does he not?’

‘Certainly he does,’ said Mrs Davilow, encouraged, and persuaded that after all Gwendolen was fond of her betrothed. She herself thought him a man whose attentions were likely to tell on a girl’s feeling. Suitors must often be judged as words are, by their standing and the figure they make in polite society: it is difficult to know much else of them. And all the mother’s anxiety turned, not on Grandcourt’s character, but on Gwendolen’s mood in accepting him.

The mood was necessarily passing through a new phase this morning. Even in the hour of making her toilet, she had drawn on all the knowledge she had for grounds to justify her marriage. And what she most dwelt on was the determination, that when she was Grandcourt’s wife, she would urge him to the most liberal conduct towards Mrs Glasher’s children.

‘Of what use would it be to her that I should not marry him? He could have married her if he had liked; but he did *not* like. Perhaps she is to blame for that. There must be a great deal about her that I know nothing of. And he must have been good to her in many ways, else she would not have wanted to marry him.’

But that last argument at once began to appear doubtful. Mrs Glasher naturally wished to exclude other children who would stand between Grandcourt and her own; and Gwendolen’s comprehension of this feeling prompted another way of reconciling claims.

‘Perhaps we shall have no children. I hope we shall not. And he might leave the estate to the pretty little boy. My uncle said that Mr Grandcourt could do as he liked with the estates. Only when Sir Hugo Mallinger dies there will be enough for two.’

This made Mrs Glasher appear quite unreasonable in demanding that her boy should be sole heir; and the double property was a security that Grandcourt’s marriage would do her no wrong, when the wife was Gwendolen Harleth with all her proud resolution not to be fairly accused. This maiden had been accustomed to think herself blameless; other persons only were faulty.

It was striking, that in the hold which this argument of her doing no wrong to Mrs Glasher had taken on her mind, her repugnance to the idea of Grandcourt’s past had sunk into a subordinate feeling. The terror she had felt in the night-watches at overstepping the border of wickedness by doing what she had at first felt to be wrong, had dulled any emotions about his conduct. She was thinking of him, whatever he might be, as a man over whom she was going to have indefinite power; and her loving him having never been a question with her, any agreeableness he had was so much gain. Poor Gwendolen had no awe of unmanageable forces in the state of matrimony, but regarded it as altogether a matter of management, in which she would know how to act. In relation to Grandcourt’s past she encouraged new doubts whether he were likely to have differed much from other men; and she devised little schemes for learning what was expected of men in general.

But whatever else might be true in the world, her hair was dressed suitably for riding, and she went down in her riding-habit, to avoid delay before getting on horseback. She wanted to have her blood stirred once more with the intoxication of youth, and to recover the daring with which she had been used to think of her course in life. Already a load was lifted off her; for in daylight and activity it was less oppressive to have doubts about her choice, than to feel that she had no choice but to endure insignificance and servitude.

‘Go back and make yourself look like a duchess, mamma,’ she said, turning suddenly as she was going down-stairs. ‘Put your point-lace over your head. I must have you look like a duchess. You must not take things humbly.’

When Grandcourt raised her left hand gently and looked at the ring, she said gravely, ‘It was very good of you to think of everything and send me that packet.’

‘You will tell me if there is anything I forget?’ he said, keeping the hand softly within his own. ‘I will do anything you wish.’

‘But I am very unreasonable in my wishes,’ said Gwendolen, smiling.

‘Yes, I expect that. Women always are.’

‘Then I will not be unreasonable,’ said Gwendolen, taking away her hand and tossing her head saucily. ‘I

will not be told that I am what women always are.'

'I did not say that,' said Grandcourt, looking at her with his usual gravity. 'You are what no other woman is.'

'And what is that, pray?' said Gwendolen, moving to a distance with a little air of menace.

Grandcourt made his pause before he answered. 'You are the woman I love.'

'Oh what nice speeches!' said Gwendolen, laughing. The sense of that love which he must once have given to another woman under strange circumstances was getting familiar.

'Give me a nice speech in return. Say when we are to be married.'

'Not yet. Not till we have had a gallop over the downs. I am so thirsty for that, I can think of nothing else. I wish the hunting had begun. Sunday the twentieth, twenty-seventh, Monday, Tuesday.' Gwendolen was counting on her fingers with the prettiest nod while she looked at Grandcourt, and at last swept one palm over the other while she said triumphantly, 'It will begin in ten days!'

'Let us be married in ten days, then,' said Grandcourt, 'and we shall not be bored about the stables.'

'What do women always say in answer to that?' said Gwendolen, mischievously.

'They agree to it,' said the lover, rather off his guard.

'Then I will not!' said Gwendolen, taking up her gauntlets and putting them on, while she kept her eyes on him with gathering fun in them.

The scene was pleasant on both sides. A cruder lover would have lost the view of her pretty ways and attitudes, and spoiled all by stupid attempts at caresses, utterly destructive of drama. Grandcourt preferred the drama; and Gwendolen, left at ease, found her spirits rising continually as she played at reigning. Perhaps if Klesmer had seen more of her in this unconscious kind of acting, instead of when she was trying to be theatrical, he might have rated her chance higher.

When they had had a glorious gallop, however, she was in a state of exhilaration that disposed her to think well of hastening the marriage which would make her life all of a piece with this splendid kind of enjoyment. She would not debate any more about an act to which she had committed herself; and she consented to fix the wedding on that day three weeks, notwithstanding the difficulty of fulfilling the customary laws of the *trousseau*.

Lush, of course, was made aware of the engagement by abundant signs, without being formally told. But he expected some communication as a consequence of it, and after a few days he became rather impatient under Grandcourt's silence, feeling sure that the change would affect his personal prospects, and wishing to know exactly how. His tactics no longer included any opposition – which he did not love for its own sake. He might easily cause Grandcourt a great deal of annoyance, but it would be to his own injury, and to create annoyance was not a motive with him. Miss Gwendolen he would certainly not have been sorry to frustrate a little, but – after all there was no knowing what would come. It was nothing new that Grandcourt should show a perverse wilfulness; yet in his freak about this girl he struck Lush rather newly as something like a man who was *fey* – led on by an ominous fatality; and that one born to his fortune should make a worse business of his life than was necessary, seemed really pitiable. Having protested against the marriage, Lush had a second-sight for its evil consequences. Grandcourt had been taking the pains to write letters and give orders himself instead of employing Lush; and appeared to be ignoring his usefulness, even choosing, against the habit of years, to breakfast alone in his dressing-room. But a *tête-à-tête* was not to be avoided in a house empty of guests; and Lush hastened to use an opportunity of saying – it was one day after dinner, for there were difficulties in Grandcourt's dining at Offendene –

'And when is the marriage to take place?'

Grandcourt, who drank little wine, had left the table and was lounging, while he smoked, in an easy-chair near the hearth, where a fire of oak boughs was gaping to its glowing depths, and edging them with a delicate tint of ashes delightful to behold. The chair of red-brown velvet brocade was a becoming background for his pale-tinted well-cut features and exquisite long hands: omitting the cigar, you might have imagined him a portrait by Moroni, who would have rendered wonderfully the impenetrable gaze and air of distinction; and a portrait by that great master would have been quite as lively a companion as Grandcourt was disposed to be. But he answered without unusual delay.

'On the tenth.'

'I suppose you intend to remain here.'

'We shall go to Ryelands for a little while; but we shall return here for the sake of the hunting.'

After this word there was the languid inarticulate sound frequent with Grandcourt when he meant to continue speaking, and Lush waited for something more. Nothing came, and he was going to put another question, when the inarticulate sound began again and introduced the mildly-uttered suggestion –

'You had better make some new arrangement for yourself.'

'What! I am to cut and run?' said Lush, prepared to be good-tempered on the occasion.

‘Something of that kind.’

‘The bride objects to me. I hope she will make up to you for the want of my services.’

‘I can’t help your being so damnably disagreeable to women,’ said Grandcourt, in soothing apology.

‘To one woman, if you please.’

‘It makes no difference, since she is the one in question.’

‘I suppose I am not to be turned adrift after fifteen years without some provision.’

‘You must have saved something out of me.’

‘Deuced little. I have often saved something for you.’

‘You can have three hundred a-year. But you must live in town and be ready to look after things for me when I want you. I shall be rather hard up.’

‘If you are not going to be at Ryelands this winter, I might run down there and let you know how Swinton goes on.’

‘If you like. I don’t care a toss where you are, so that you keep out of sight.’

‘Much obliged,’ said Lush, able to take the affair more easily than he had expected. He was supported by the secret belief that he should by-and-by be wanted as much as ever.

‘Perhaps you will not object to packing up as soon as possible,’ said Grandcourt. ‘The Torringtons are coming, and Miss Harleth will be riding over here.’

‘With all my heart. Can’t I be of use in going to Gadsmere?’

‘No. I am going myself.’

‘About your being rather hard up. Have you thought of that plan —’

‘Just leave me alone, will you?’ said Grandcourt, in his lowest audible tone, tossing his cigar into the fire, and rising to walk away.

He spent the evening in the solitude of the smaller drawing-room, where, with various new publications on the table, of the kind a gentleman may like to have at hand without touching, he employed himself (as a philosopher might have done) in sitting meditatively on a sofa and abstaining from literature – political, comic, cynical, or romantic. In this way hours may pass surprisingly soon, without the arduous invisible chase of philosophy; not from love of thought, but from hatred of effort – from a state of the inward world, something like premature age, where the need for action lapses into a mere image of what has been, is, and may or might be; where impulse is born and dies in a phantasmal world, pausing in rejection even of a shadowy fulfilment. That is a condition which often comes with whitening hair; and sometimes, too, an intense obstinacy and tenacity of rule, like the main trunk of an exorbitant egoism, conspicuous in proportion as the varied susceptibilities of younger years are stripped away.

But Grandcourt’s hair, though he had not much of it, was of a fine sunny blond, and his moods were not entirely to be explained as ebbing energy. We mortals have a strange spiritual chemistry going on within us, so that a lazy stagnation or even a cottony milkiness may be preparing one knows not what biting or explosive material. The navvy waking from sleep and without malice heaving a stone to crush the life out of his still sleeping comrade, is understood to lack the trained motive which makes a character fairly calculable in its actions; but by a roundabout course even a gentleman may make of himself a chancy personage, raising an uncertainty as to what he may do next, which sadly spoils companionship.

Grandcourt’s thoughts this evening were like the circlets one sees in a dark pool continually dying out and continually started again by some impulse from below the surface. The deeper central impulse came from the image of Gwendolen; but the thoughts it stirred would be imperfectly illustrated by a reference to the amatory poets of all ages. It was characteristic that he got none of his satisfaction from the belief that Gwendolen was in love with him; and that love had overcome the jealous resentment which had made her run away from him. On the contrary, he believed that this girl was rather exceptional in the fact that, in spite of his assiduous attention to her, she was not in love with him; and it seemed to him very likely that if it had not been for the sudden poverty which had come over her family, she would not have accepted him. From the very first there had been an exasperating fascination in the tricksiness with which she had – not met his advances, but – wheeled away from them. She had been brought to accept him in spite of everything – brought to kneel down like a horse under training for the arena, though she might have an objection to it all the while. On the whole, Grandcourt got more pleasure out of this notion than he could have done out of winning a girl of whom he was sure that she had a strong inclination for him personally. And yet this pleasure in mastering reluctance flourished along with the habitual persuasion that no woman whom he favoured could be quite indifferent to his personal influence; and it seemed to him not unlikely that by-and-by Gwendolen might be more enamoured of him than he of her. In any case she would have to submit; and he enjoyed thinking of her as his future wife, whose pride and spirit were suited to command every one but himself. He had no taste for a woman who was all tenderness to him, full of petitioning solicitude and willing obedience. He meant to be master of a woman who would have liked to master him, and who perhaps would have been capable of

mastering another man.

Lush, having failed in his attempted reminder to Grandcourt, thought it well to communicate with Sir Hugo, in whom, as a man having perhaps interest enough to command the bestowal of some place where the work was light, gentlemanly, and not ill-paid, he was anxious to cultivate a sense of friendly obligation, not feeling at all secure against the future need of such a place. He wrote the following letter, and addressed it to Park Lane, whither he knew the family had returned from Leubronn: –

> 'My dear Sir Hugo, – Since we came home the marriage has been absolutely decided on, and is to take place in less than three weeks. It is so far the worse for him that her mother has lately lost all her fortune, and he will have to find supplies. Grandcourt, I know, is feeling the want of cash; and unless some other plan is resorted to, he will be raising money in a foolish way. I am going to leave Diplow immediately, and I shall not be able to start the topic. What I should advise is, that Mr Deronda, who I know has your confidence, should propose to come and pay a short visit here, according to invitation (there are going to be other people in the house), and that you should put him fully in possession of your wishes and the possible extent of your offer. Then, that he should introduce the subject to Grandcourt so as not to imply that you suspect any particular want of money on his part, but only that there is a strong wish on yours. What I have formerly said to him has been in the way of a conjecture that you might be willing to give a good sum for his chance of Diplow; but if Mr Deronda came armed with a definite offer, that would take another sort of hold. Ten to one he will not close for some time to come; but the proposal will have got a stronger lodgment in his mind; and though at present he has a great notion of the hunting here, I see a likelihood, under the circumstances, that he will get a distaste for the neighbourhood, and there will be the notion of the money sticking by him without being urged. I would bet on your ultimate success. As I am not to be exiled to Siberia, but am to be within call, it is possible that, by-and-by, I may be of more service to you. But at present I can think of no medium so good as Mr Deronda. Nothing puts Grandcourt in worse humour than having the lawyers thrust their paper under his nose uninvited.
>
> 'Trusting that your visit to Leubronn has put you in excellent condition for the winter, I remain, my dear Sir Hugo, yours very faithfully,
>
> 'Thomas Cranmer Lush'

Sir Hugo, having received this letter at breakfast, handed it to Deronda, who, though he had chambers in town, was somehow hardly ever in them, Sir Hugo not being contented without him. The chatty baronet would have liked a young companion even if there had been no peculiar reasons for attachment between them: one with a fine harmonious unspoiled face fitted to keep up a cheerful view of posterity and inheritance generally, notwithstanding particular disappointments; and his affection for Deronda was not diminished by the deep-lying though not obtrusive difference in their notions and tastes. Perhaps it was all the stronger; acting as the same sort of difference does between a man and a woman in giving a piquancy to the attachment which subsists in spite of it. Sir Hugo did not think unapprovingly of himself; but he looked at men and society from a liberal-menagerie point of view, and he had a certain pride in Deronda's differing from him, which, if it had found voice, might have said – 'You see this fine young fellow – not such as you see every day, is he? – he belongs to me in a sort of way, I brought him up from a child; but you would not ticket him off easily, he has notions of his own, and he's as far as the poles asunder from what I was at his age.' This state of feeling was kept up by the mental balance in Deronda, who was moved by an affectionateness such as we are apt to call feminine, disposing him to yield in ordinary details, while he had a certain inflexibility of judgment, and independence of opinion, held to be rightfully masculine.

When he had read the letter, he returned it without speaking, inwardly wincing under Lush's mode of attributing a neutral usefulness to him in the family affairs.

'What do you say, Dan? It would be pleasant enough for you. You have not seen the place for a good many years now, and you might have a famous run with the harriers if you went down next week,' said Sir Hugo.

'I should not go on that account,' said Deronda, buttering his bread attentively. He had an objection to this transparent kind of persuasiveness, which all intelligent animals are seen to treat with indifference. If he went to Diplow he should be doing something disagreeable to oblige Sir Hugo.

'I think Lush's notion is a good one. And it would be a pity to lose the occasion.'

'That is a different matter – if you think my going of importance to your object,' said Deronda, still with that aloofness of manner which implied some suppression. He knew that the baronet had set his heart on the affair.

'Why, you will see the fair gambler, the Leubronn Diana, I shouldn't wonder,' said Sir Hugo, gaily. 'We shall have to invite her to the Abbey, when they are married, Louisa,' he added, turning to Lady Mallinger, as if she too had read the letter.

'I cannot conceive whom you mean,' said Lady Mallinger, who in fact had not been listening, her mind having been taken up with her first sips of coffee, the objectionable cuff of her sleeve, and the necessity of carrying Theresa to the dentist – innocent and partly laudable preoccupations, as the gentle lady's usually were. Should her appearance be inquired after, let it be said that she had reddish blonde hair (the hair of the period), a small Roman nose, rather prominent blue eyes and delicate eyelids, with a figure which her thinner friends called fat, her hands showing curves and dimples like a magnified baby's.

'I mean that Grandcourt is going to marry the girl you saw at Leubronn – don't you remember her – the Miss Harleth who used to play at roulette.'

'Dear me! Is that a good match for him?'

'That depends on the sort of goodness he wants,' said Sir Hugo, smiling. 'However, she and her friends have

nothing, and she will bring him expenses. It's a good match for my purposes, because if I am willing to fork out a sum of money, he may be willing to give up his chance of Diplow, so that we shall have it out and out, and when I die you will have the consolation of going to the place you would like to go to – wherever I may go.'

'I wish you would not talk of dying in that light way, dear.'

'It's rather a heavy way, Lou, for I shall have to pay a heavy sum – forty thousand, at least.'

'But why are we to invite them to the Abbey?' said Lady Mallinger. 'I do *not* like women who gamble, like Lady Cragstone.'

'Oh, you will not mind her for a week. Besides, she is not like Lady Cragstone because she gambled a little, any more than I am like a broker because I'm a Whig. I want to keep Grandcourt in good humour, and to let him see plenty of this place, that he may think the less of Diplow. I don't know yet whether I shall get him to meet me in this matter. And if Dan were to go over on a visit there, he might hold out the bait to him. It would be doing me a great service.' This was meant for Deronda.

'Daniel is not fond of Mr Grandcourt, I think, is he?' said Lady Mallinger, looking at Deronda inquiringly.

'There is no avoiding everybody one doesn't happen to be fond of,' said Deronda. 'I will go to Diplow – I don't know that I have anything better to do – since Sir Hugo wishes it.'

'That's a trump!' said Sir Hugo, well pleased. 'And if you don't find it very pleasant, it's so much experience. Nothing used to come amiss to me when I was young. You must see men and manners.'

'Yes; but I have seen that man, and something of his manners too,' said Deronda.

'Not nice manners, I think,' said Lady Mallinger.

'Well, you see they succeed with your sex,' said Sir Hugo, provokingly. 'And he was an uncommonly good-looking fellow when he was two or three and twenty – like his father. He doesn't take after his father in marrying the heiress, though. If he had got Miss Arrowpoint and my land too, confound him, he would have had a fine principality.'

Deronda, in anticipating the projected visit, felt less disinclination than when consenting to it. The story of that girl's marriage did interest him: what he had heard through Lush of her having run away from the suit of the man she was now going to take as a husband, had thrown a new sort of light on her gambling; and it was probably the transition from that fevered worldliness into poverty which had urged her acceptance where she must in some way have felt repulsion. All this implied a nature liable to difficulty and struggle – elements of life which had a predominant attraction for his sympathy, due perhaps to his early pain in dwelling on the conjectured story of his own existence. Persons attracted him, as Hans Meyrick had done, in proportion to the possibility of his defending them, rescuing them, telling upon their lives with some sort of redeeming influence; and he had to resist an inclination, easily accounted for, to withdraw coldly from the fortunate. But in the movement which had led him to repurchase Gwendolen's necklace for her, and which was at work in him still, there was something beyond his habitual compassionate fervour – something due to the fascination of her womanhood. He was very open to that sort of charm, and mingled it with the consciously Utopian pictures of his own future; yet any one able to trace the folds of his character might have conceived that he would be more likely than many less passionate men to love a woman without telling her of it. Sprinkle food before a delicate-eared bird: there is nothing he would more willingly take, yet he keeps aloof, because of his sensibility to checks which to you are imperceptible. And one man differs from another, as we all differ from the Bosjesman, in a sensibility to checks, that come from variety of needs, spiritual or other. It seemed to foreshadow that capability of reticence in Deronda that his imagination was much occupied with two women, to neither of whom would he have held it possible that he should ever make love. Hans Meyrick had laughed at him for having something of the knight-errant in his disposition; and he would have found his proof if he had known what was just now going on in Deronda's mind about Mirah and Gwendolen.

Deronda wrote without delay to announce the visit to Diplow, and received in reply a polite assurance that his coming would give great pleasure. That was not altogether untrue. Grandcourt thought it probable that the visit was prompted by Sir Hugo's desire to court him for a purpose which he did not make up his mind to resist; and it was not a disagreeable idea to him that this fine fellow, whom he believed to be his cousin under the rose, would witness, perhaps with some jealousy, Henleigh Mallinger Grandcourt play the commanding part of betrothed lover to a splendid girl whom the cousin had already looked at with admiration.

Grandcourt himself was not jealous of anything unless it threatened his mastery – which he did not think himself likely to lose.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

‘Surely whoever speaks to me in the right voice,
him or her I shall follow,
As the water follows the moon, silently,
with fluid steps anywhere around the globe.’

– WALT WHITMAN

‘Now my cousins are at Diplow,’ said Grandcourt, ‘will you go there? – to-morrow? The carriage shall come for Mrs Davilow. You can tell me what you would like done in the rooms. Things must be put in decent order while we are away at Ryelands. And to-morrow is the only day.’

He was sitting sideways on a sofa in the drawing-room at Offendene, one hand and elbow resting on the back, and the other hand thrust between his crossed knees – in the attitude of a man who is much interested in watching the person next to him. Gwendolen, who had always disliked needlework, had taken to it with apparent zeal since her engagement, and now held a piece of white embroidery which on examination would have shown many false stitches. During the last eight or nine days their hours had been chiefly spent on horseback, but some margin had always been left for this more difficult sort of companionship, which, however, Gwendolen had not found disagreeable. She was very well satisfied with Grandcourt. His answers to her lively questions about what he had seen and done in his life, bore drawling very well. From the first she had noticed that he knew what to say; and she was constantly feeling not only that he had nothing of the fool in his composition, but that by some subtle means he communicated to her the impression that all the folly lay with other people, who did what he did not care to do. A man who seems to have been able to command the best, has a sovereign power of depreciation. Then Grandcourt’s behaviour as a lover had hardly at all passed the limit of an amorous homage which was inobtrusive as a wafted odour of roses, and spent all its effect in a gratified vanity. One day, indeed, he had kissed not her cheek but her neck a little below her ear; and Gwendolen, taken by surprise, had started up with a marked agitation which made him rise too and say, ‘I beg your pardon – did I annoy you?’ ‘Oh, it was nothing,’ said Gwendolen, rather afraid of herself, ‘only I cannot bear – to be kissed under my ear.’ She sat down again with a little playful laugh, but all the while she felt her heart beating with a vague fear: she was no longer at liberty to flout him as she had flouted poor Rex. Her agitation seemed not uncomplimentary, and he had been contented not to transgress again.

To-day a slight rain hindered riding; but to compensate, a package had come from London, and Mrs Davilow had just left the room after bringing in for admiration the beautiful things (of Grandcourt’s ordering) which lay scattered about on the tables. Gwendolen was just then enjoying the scenery of her life. She let her hands fall on her lap and said with a pretty air of perversity –

‘Why is to-morrow the only day?’

‘Because the next day is the first with the hounds,’ said Grandcourt.

‘And after that?’

‘After that I must go away for a couple of days – it’s a bore – but I shall go one day and come back the next.’ Grandcourt noticed a change in her face, and releasing his hand from under his knees, he laid it on hers, and said, ‘You object to my going away?’

‘It is no use objecting,’ said Gwendolen, coldly. She was resisting to the utmost her temptation to tell him that she suspected to whom he was going – and the temptation to make a clean breast, speaking without restraint.

‘Yes it is,’ said Grandcourt, enfolding her hand. ‘I will put off going. And I will travel at night, so as only to be away one day.’ He thought that he knew the reason of what he inwardly called this bit of temper, and she was particularly fascinating to him at this moment.

‘Then don’t put off going, but travel at night,’ said Gwendolen, feeling that she could command him, and finding in this peremptoriness a small outlet for her irritation.

‘Then you will go to Diplow to-morrow?’

‘Oh yes, if you wish it,’ said Gwendolen, in a high tone of careless assent. Her concentration in other feelings had really hindered her from taking notice that her hand was being held.

‘How you treat us poor devils of men!’ said Grandcourt, lowering his tone. ‘We are always getting the worst of it.’

‘*Are* you?’ said Gwendolen, in a tone of inquiry, looking at him more naïvely than usual. She longed to believe this commonplace *badinage* as the serious truth about her lover: in that case, she too was justified. If she knew everything, Mrs Glasher would appear more blamable than Grandcourt. ‘*Are* you always getting the worst?’

‘Yes. Are you as kind to me as I am to you?’ said Grandcourt, looking into her eyes with his narrow gaze.

Gwendolen felt herself stricken. She was conscious of having received so much, that her sense of command was checked, and sank away in the perception that, look around her as she might, she could not turn back: it was as if she had consented to mount a chariot where another held the reins; and it was not in her nature to leap out in the eyes of the world. She had not consented in ignorance, and all she could say now would be a confession that she had not been ignorant. Her right to explanation was gone. All she had to do now was to adjust herself, so that the spikes of that unwilling penance which conscience imposed should not gall her. With a sort of mental shiver, she resolutely changed her mental attitude. There had been a little pause, during which she had not turned away her eyes; and with a sudden break into a smile, she said –

‘If I were as kind to you as you are to me, that would spoil your generosity: it would no longer be as great as it could be – and it is that now.’

‘Then I am not to ask for one kiss,’ said Grandcourt, contented to pay a large price for this new kind of love-making, which introduced marriage by the finest contrast.

‘Not one!’ said Gwendolen, getting saucy, and nodding at him defiantly.

He lifted her little left hand to his lips, and then released it respectfully. Clearly it was faint praise to say of him that he was not disgusting: he was almost charming; and she felt at this moment that it was not likely she could ever have loved another man better than this one. His reticence gave her some inexplicable, delightful consciousness.

‘Apropos,’ she said, taking up her work again, ‘is there any one besides Captain and Mrs Torrington at Diplow? – or do you leave them *tête-à-tête*? I suppose he converses in cigars, and she answers with her chignon.’

‘She has a sister with her,’ said Grandcourt, with his shadow of a smile, ‘and there are two men besides – one of them you know, I believe.’

‘Ah, then, I have a poor opinion of him,’ said Gwendolen, shaking her head.

‘You saw him at Leubronn – young Deronda – a young fellow with the Mallingers.’

Gwendolen felt as if her heart were making a sudden gambol, and her fingers, which tried to keep a firm hold on her work, got cold.

‘I never spoke to him,’ she said, dreading any discernible change in herself. ‘Is he not disagreeable?’

‘No, not particularly,’ said Grandcourt, in his most languid way. ‘He thinks a little too much of himself. I thought he had been introduced to you.’

‘No. Some one told me his name the evening before I came away; that was all. What is he?’

‘A sort of ward of Sir Hugo Mallinger’s. Nothing of any consequence.’

‘Oh, poor creature! How very unpleasant for him!’ said Gwendolen, speaking from the lip, and not meaning any sarcasm. ‘I wonder if it has left off raining!’ she added, rising and going to look out of the window.

Happily it did not rain the next day, and Gwendolen rode to Diplow on Criterion as she had done on that former day when she returned with her mother in the carriage. She always felt the more daring for being in her riding-dress; besides having the agreeable belief that she looked as well as possible in it – a sustaining consciousness in any meeting which seems formidable. Her anger towards Deronda had changed into a superstitious dread – due, perhaps, to the coercion he had exercised over her thought – lest that first interference of his in her life might foreshadow some future influence. It is of such stuff that superstitions are commonly made: an intense feeling about ourselves which makes the evening star shine at us with a threat, and the blessing of a beggar encourage us. And superstitions carry consequences which often verify their hope or their foreboding.

The time before luncheon was taken up for Gwendolen by going over the rooms with Mrs Torrington and Mrs Davilow; and she thought it likely that if she saw Deronda, there would hardly be need for more than a bow between them. She meant to notice him as little as possible.

And after all she found herself under an inward compulsion too strong for her pride. From the first moment of their being in the room together, she seemed to herself to be doing nothing but notice him; everything else was automatic performance of an habitual part.

When he took his place at lunch, Grandcourt had said, ‘Deronda, Miss Harleth tells me you were not introduced to her at Leubronn?’

‘Miss Harleth hardly remembers me, I imagine,’ said Deronda, looking at her quite simply, as they bowed.

‘She was intensely occupied when I saw her.’

Now, did he suppose that she had not suspected him of being the person who redeemed her necklace?

‘On the contrary. I remember you very well,’ said Gwendolen, feeling rather nervous, but governing herself and looking at him in return with new examination. ‘You did not approve of my playing at roulette.’

‘How did you come to that conclusion?’ said Deronda, gravely.

‘Oh, you cast an evil eye on my play,’ said Gwendolen, with a turn of her head and a smile. ‘I began to lose as soon as you came to look on. I had always been winning till then.’

‘Roulette in such a kennel as Leubronn is a horrid bore,’ said Grandcourt.

‘*I* found it a bore when I began to lose,’ said Gwendolen. Her face was turned towards Grandcourt as she smiled and spoke, but she gave a sidelong glance at Deronda, and saw his eyes fixed on her with a look so gravely penetrating that it had a keener edge for her than his ironical smile at her losses – a keener edge than Klesmer’s judgment. She wheeled her neck round as if she wanted to listen to what was being said by the rest, while she was only thinking of Deronda. His face had that disturbing kind of form and expression which threatens to affect opinion – as if one’s standard were somehow wrong. (Who has not seen men with faces of this corrective power till they frustrated it by speech or action?) His voice, heard now for the first time, was to Grandcourt’s toneless drawl, which had been in her ears every day, as the deep notes of a violoncello to the broken discourse of poultry and other lazy gentry in the afternoon sunshine. Grandcourt, she inwardly conjectured, was perhaps right in saying that Deronda thought too much of himself: – a favourite way of explaining a superiority that humiliates. However, the talk turned on the rinderpest and Jamaica, and no more was said about roulette. Grandcourt held that the Jamaican negro was a beastly sort of baptist Caliban; Deronda said he had always felt a little with Caliban, who naturally had his own point of view and could sing a good song; Mrs Davilow observed that her father had an estate in Barbadoes, but that she herself had never been in the West Indies; Mrs Torrington was sure she should never sleep in her bed if she lived among blacks; her husband corrected her by saying that the blacks would be manageable enough if it were not for the half-breeds; and Deronda remarked that the whites had to thank themselves for the half-breeds.

While this polite pea-shooting was going on, Gwendolen trifled with her jelly, and looked at every speaker in turn that she might feel at ease in looking at Deronda.

‘I wonder what he thinks of me really? He must have felt interested in me, else he would not have sent me my necklace. I wonder what he thinks of my marriage? What notions has he to make him so grave about things? Why is he come to Diplow?’

These questions ran in her mind as the voice of an uneasy longing to be judged by Deronda with unmixed admiration – a longing which had had its seed in her first resentment at his critical glance. Why did she care so much about the opinion of this man who was ‘nothing of any consequence’? She had no time to find the reason – she was too much engaged in caring. In the drawing-room, when something had called Grandcourt away, she went quite unpremeditatedly up to Deronda, who was standing at a table apart, turning over some prints, and said to him –

‘Shall you hunt to-morrow, Mr Deronda?’

‘Yes, I believe so.’

‘You don’t object to hunting, then?’

‘I find excuses for it. It is a sin I am inclined to – when I can’t get boating or cricketing.’

‘Do you object to my hunting?’ said Gwendolen, with a saucy movement of the chin.

‘I have no right to object to anything you choose to do.’

‘You thought you had a right to object to my gambling,’ persisted Gwendolen.

‘I was sorry for it. I am not aware that I told you of my objection,’ said Deronda, with his usual directness of gaze – a large-eyed gravity, innocent of any intention. His eyes had a peculiarity which has drawn many men into trouble; they were of a dark yet mild intensity, which seemed to express a special interest in every one on whom he fixed them, and might easily help to bring on him those claims which ardently sympathetic people are often creating in the minds of those who need help. In mendicant fashion, we make the goodness of others a reason for exorbitant demands on them. That sort of effect was penetrating Gwendolen.

‘You hindered me from gambling again,’ she answered. But she had no sooner spoken than she blushed over face and neck; and Deronda blushed too, conscious that in the little affair of the necklace he had taken a questionable freedom.

It was impossible to speak further; and she turned away to a window, feeling that she had stupidly said what she had not meant to say, and yet being rather happy that she had plunged into this mutual understanding. Deronda also did not dislike it. Gwendolen seemed more decidedly attractive than before; and certainly there had been changes going on within her since that time at Leubronn: the struggle of mind attending a conscious error had wakened something like a new soul, which had better, but also worse, possibilities than her former poise of crude self-confidence: among the forces she had come to dread was

something within her that troubled satisfaction.

That evening Mrs Davilow said, ‘Was it really so, or only a joke of yours, about Mr Deronda’s spoiling your play, Gwen?’

Her curiosity had been excited, and she could venture to ask a question that did not concern Mr Grandcourt.

‘Oh, it merely happened that he was looking on when I began to lose,’ said Gwendolen, carelessly. ‘I noticed him.’

‘I don’t wonder at that: he is a striking young man. He puts me in mind of Italian paintings. One would guess, without being told, that there was foreign blood in his veins.’

‘Is there?’ said Gwendolen.

‘Mrs Torrington says so. I asked particularly who he was, and she told me that his mother was some foreigner of high rank.’

‘His mother?’ said Gwendolen, rather sharply. ‘Then who was his father?’

‘Well – every one says he is the son of Sir Hugo Mallinger, who brought him up; though he passes for a ward. She says, if Sir Hugo Mallinger could have done as he liked with his estates, he would have left them to this Mr Deronda, since he has no legitimate son.’

Gwendolen was silent; but her mother observed so marked an effect in her face that she was angry with herself for having repeated Mrs Torrington’s gossip. It seemed, on reflection, unsuited to the ear of her daughter, for whom Mrs Davilow disliked what is called knowledge of the world; and indeed she wished that she herself had not had any of it thrust upon her.

An image which had immediately arisen in Gwendolen’s mind was that of the unknown mother – no doubt a dark-eyed woman – probably sad. Hardly any face could be less like Deronda’s than that represented as Sir Hugo’s in a crayon portrait at Diplow. A dark-eyed beautiful woman, no longer young, had become ‘stuff o’ the conscience’ to Gwendolen.

That night when she had got into her little bed, and only a dim light was burning, she said –

‘Mamma, have men generally children before they are married?’

‘No, dear, no,’ said Mrs Davilow. ‘Why do you ask such a question?’ (But she began to think that she saw the why.)

‘If it were so, I ought to know,’ said Gwendolen, with some indignation.

‘You are thinking of what I said about Mr Deronda and Sir Hugo Mallinger. That is a very unusual case, dear.’

‘Does Lady Mallinger know?’

‘She knows enough to satisfy her. That is quite clear, because Mr Deronda has lived with them.’

‘And people think no worse of him?’

‘Well, of course he is under some disadvantage: it is not as if he were Lady Mallinger’s son. He does not inherit the property, and he is not of any consequence in the world. But people are not obliged to know anything about his birth; you see, he is very well received.’

‘I wonder whether he knows about it; and whether he is angry with his father?’

‘My dear child, why should you think of that?’

‘Why?’ said Gwendolen, impetuously, sitting up in her bed. ‘Haven’t children reason to be angry with their parents? How can they help their parents marrying or not marrying?’

But a consciousness rushed upon her, which made her fall back again on her pillow. It was not only what she would have felt months before – that she might seem to be reproaching her mother for that second marriage of hers; – what she chiefly felt now was, that she had been led on to a condemnation which seemed to make her own marriage a forbidden thing.

There was no further talk, and till sleep came over her, Gwendolen lay struggling with the reasons against that marriage – reasons which pressed upon her newly now that they were unexpectedly mirrored in the story of a man whose slight relations with her had, by some hidden affinity, bitten themselves into the most permanent layers of feeling. It was characteristic that, with all her debating, she was never troubled by the question whether the indefensibleness of her marriage did not include the fact that she had accepted Grandcourt solely as the man whom it was convenient for her to marry, not in the least as one to whom she would be binding herself in duty. Gwendolen’s ideas were pitiably crude; but many grand difficulties of life are apt to force themselves on us in our crudity. And to judge wisely I suppose we must know how things appear to the unwise; that kind of appearance making the larger part of the world’s history.

In the morning, there was a double excitement for her. She was going to hunt, from which scruples about propriety had threatened to hinder her, until it was found that Mrs Torrington was horsewoman enough to accompany her: – going to hunt for the first time since her escapade with Rex; and she was going again to see Deronda, in whom, since last night, her interest had so gathered that she expected, as people do about

revealed celebrities, to see something in his appearance which she had missed before. What was he going to be? What sort of life had he before him – he being nothing of any consequence? And with only a little difference in events he might have been as important as Grandcourt, nay – her imagination inevitably went in that direction – might have held the very estates which Grandcourt was to have. But now, Deronda would probably some day see her mistress of the Abbey at Topping, see her bearing the title which would have been his own wife's. These obvious, futile thoughts of what might have been, made a new epoch for Gwendolen. She, whose unquestioning habit it had been to take the best that came to her for less than her own claim, had now to see the position which tempted her in a new light, as a hard, unfair exclusion of others. What she had now heard about Deronda seemed to her imagination to throw him into one group with Mrs Glasher and her children; before whom she felt herself in an attitude of apology – she who had hitherto been surrounded by a group that in her opinion had need be apologetic to her. Perhaps Deronda himself was thinking of these things. Could he know of Mrs Glasher? If he knew that she knew, he would despise her; but he could have no such knowledge. Would he, without that, despise her for marrying Grandcourt? His possible judgment of her actions was telling on her as importunately as Klesmer's judgment of her powers; but she found larger room for resistance to a disapproval of her marriage, because it is easier to make our conduct seem justifiable to ourselves than to make our ability strike others. 'How can I help it?' is not our favourite apology for incompetence. But Gwendolen felt some strength in saying –

'How can I help what other people have done? Things would not come right if I were to turn round now and declare that I would not marry Mr Grandcourt.' And such turning round was out of the question. The horses in the chariot she had mounted were going at full speed.

This mood of youthful, elated desperation had a tidal recurrence. She could dare anything that lay before her sooner than she could choose to go backward into humiliation; and it was even soothing to think that there would now be as much ill-doing in the one as in the other. But the immediate delightful fact was the hunt, where she would see Deronda, and where he would see her; for always lurking ready to obtrude before other thoughts about him was the impression that he was very much interested in her. But to-day she was resolved not to repeat her folly of yesterday, as if she were anxious to say anything to him. Indeed, the hunt would be too absorbing.

And so it was for a long while. Deronda was there, and within her sight very often; but this only added to the stimulus of a pleasure which Gwendolen had only once before tasted, and which seemed likely always to give a delight independent of any crosses, except such as took away the chance of riding. No accident happened to throw them together; the run took them within convenient reach of home, and in the agreeable sombreness of the grey November afternoon, with a long stratum of yellow light in the west, Gwendolen was returning with the company from Diplow, who were attending her on the way to Offendene. Now that the sense of glorious excitement was over and gone, she was getting irritably disappointed that she had had no opportunity of speaking to Deronda, whom she would not see again, since he was to go away in a couple of days. What was she going to say? That was not quite certain. She wanted to speak to him. Grandcourt was by her side; Mrs Torrington, her husband, and another gentleman in advance; and Deronda's horse she could hear behind. The wish to speak to him and have him speaking to her was becoming imperious; and there was no chance of it unless she simply asserted her will and defied everything. Where the order of things could give way to Miss Gwendolen, it must be made to do so. They had lately emerged from a wood of pines and beeches, where the twilight stillness had a repressing effect, which increased her impatience. The horse-hoofs again heard behind at some little distance were a growing irritation. She reined in her horse and looked behind her; Grandcourt, after a few paces, also paused; but she, waving her whip and nodding sideways with playful imperiousness, said, 'Go on! I want to speak to Mr Deronda.'

Grandcourt hesitated; but that he would have done after any proposition. It was an awkward situation for him. No gentleman, before marriage, could give the emphasis of refusal to a command delivered in this playful way. He rode on slowly, and she waited till Deronda came up. He looked at her with tacit inquiry, and she said at once, letting her horse go alongside of his –

'Mr Deronda, you must enlighten my ignorance. I want to know why you thought it wrong for me to gamble. Is it because I am a woman?'

'Not altogether; but I regretted it the more because you were a woman,' said Deronda, with an irrepressible smile. Apparently it must be understood between them now that it was he who sent the necklace. 'I think it would be better for men not to gamble. It is a besotting kind of taste, likely to turn into a disease. And, besides, there is something revolting to me in raking a heap of money together, and internally chuckling over it, when others are feeling the loss of it. I should even call it base, if it were more than an exceptional lapse. There are enough inevitable turns of fortune which force us to see that our gain is another's loss: – that is one of the ugly aspects of life. One would like to reduce it as much as one could, not get amusement out of exaggerating it.' Deronda's voice had gathered some indignation while he was speaking.

‘But you do admit that we can’t help things,’ said Gwendolen, with a drop in her tone. The answer had not been anything like what she had expected. ‘I mean that things are so in spite of us; we can’t always help it that our gain is another’s loss.’

‘Clearly. Because of that, we should help it where we can.’

Gwendolen, biting her lip inside, paused a moment, and then forcing herself to speak with an air of playfulness again, said –

‘But why should you regret it more because I am a woman?’

‘Perhaps because we need that you should be better than we are.’

‘But suppose *we* need that men should be better than we are,’ said Gwendolen, with a little air of ‘check!’

‘That is rather a difficulty,’ said Deronda, smiling. ‘I suppose I should have said, we each of us think it would be better for the other to be good.’

‘You see, I needed you to be better than I was – and you thought so,’ said Gwendolen, nodding and laughing, while she put her horse forward and joined Grandcourt, who made no observation.

‘Don’t you want to know what I had to say to Mr Deronda?’ said Gwendolen, whose own pride required her to account for her conduct.

‘A – no,’ said Grandcourt, coldly.

‘Now that is the first impolite word you have spoken – that you don’t wish to hear what I had to say,’ said Gwendolen, playing at a pout.

‘I wish to hear what you say to me – not to other men,’ said Grandcourt.

‘Then you wish to hear this. I wanted to make him tell me why he objected to my gambling, and he gave me a little sermon.’

‘Yes – but excuse me the sermon.’ If Gwendolen imagined that Grandcourt cared about her speaking to Deronda, he wished her to understand that she was mistaken. But he was not fond of being told to ride on. She saw he was piqued, but did not mind. She had accomplished her object of speaking again to Deronda before he raised his hat and turned with the rest towards Diplow, while her lover attended her to Offendene, where he was to bid farewell before a whole day’s absence on the unspecified journey. Grandcourt had spoken truth in calling the journey a bore: he was going by train to Gadsmere.

Chapter Thirty

No penitence and no confessional:
No priest ordains it, yet they're forced to sit
Amid deep ashes of their vanished years.

Imagine a rambling, patchy house, the best part built of grey stone, and red-tiled, a round tower jutting at one of the corners, the mellow darkness of its conical roof surmounted by a weather-cock making an agreeable object either amidst the gleams and greenth of summer or the low-hanging clouds and snowy branches of winter: the ground shady with spreading trees: a great cedar flourishing on one side, backward some Scotch firs on a broken bank where the roots hung naked, and beyond, a rookery: on the other side a pool overhung with bushes, where the water-fowl fluttered and screamed: all around, a vast meadow which might be called a park, bordered by an old plantation and guarded by stone lodges which looked like little prisons. Outside the gate the country, once entirely rural and lovely, now black with coal-mines, was chiefly peopled by men and brethren with candles stuck in their hats, and with a diabolic complexion which laid them peculiarly open to suspicion in the eyes of the children at Gadsmere – Mrs Glasher's four beautiful children, who had dwelt there for about three years. Now, in November, when the flower-beds were empty, the trees leafless, and the pool blackly shivering, one might have said that the place was sombrely in keeping with the black roads and black mounds which seemed to put the district in mourning; – except when the children were playing on the gravel with the dogs for their companions. But Mrs Glasher under her present circumstances liked Gadsmere as well as she would have liked any other abode. The complete seclusion of the place, which the unattractiveness of the country secured, was exactly to her taste. When she drove her two ponies with a waggonet full of children, there were no gentry in carriages to be met, only men of business in gigs; at church there were no eyes she cared to avoid, for the curate's wife and the curate himself were either ignorant of anything to her disadvantage, or ignored it: to them she was simply a widow lady, the tenant of Gadsmere; and the name of Grandcourt was of little interest in that district compared with the names of Fletcher and Gawcome, the lessees of the collieries.

It was full ten years since the elopement of an Irish officer's beautiful wife with young Grandcourt, and a consequent duel where the bullets wounded the air only, had made some little noise. Most of those who remembered the affair now wondered what had become of that Mrs Glasher whose beauty and brilliancy had made her rather conspicuous to them in foreign places, where she was known to be living with young Grandcourt.

That he should have disentangled himself from that connection seemed only natural and desirable. As to her it was thought that a woman who was understood to have forsaken her child along with her husband had probably sunk lower. Grandcourt had of course got weary of her. He was much given to the pursuit of women: but a man in his position would by this time desire to make a suitable marriage with the fair young daughter of a noble house. No one talked of Mrs Glasher now, any more than they talked of the victim in a trial for manslaughter ten years before: she was a lost vessel after whom nobody would send out an expedition of search; but Grandcourt was seen in harbour with his colours flying, registered as seaworthy as ever.

Yet in fact Grandcourt had never disentangled himself from Mrs Glasher. His passion for her had been the strongest and most lasting he had ever known; and though it was now as dead as the music of a cracked flute, it had left a certain dull disposedness, which on the death of her husband three years before had prompted in him a vacillating notion of marrying her, in accordance with the understanding often expressed between them during the days of his first ardour. At that early time Grandcourt would willingly have paid for the freedom to be won by a divorce; but the husband would not oblige him, not wanting to be married again himself, and not wishing to have his domestic habits printed in evidence.

The altered poise which the years had brought in Mrs Glasher was just the reverse. At first she was comparatively careless about the possibility of marriage. It was enough that she had escaped from a disagreeable husband and found a sort of bliss with a lover who had completely fascinated her – young, handsome, amorous, and living in the best style, with equipage and conversation of the kind to be expected in young men of fortune who have seen everything. She was an impassioned, vivacious woman, fond of

adoration, exasperated by five years of marital rudeness; and the sense of release was so strong upon her that it stilled anxiety for more than she actually enjoyed. An equivocal position was of no importance to her then; she had no envy for the honours of a dull disregarded wife: the one spot which spoiled her vision of her new pleasant world, was the sense that she had left her three-year-old boy, who died two years afterwards, and whose first tones saying 'mamma' retained a difference from those of the children that came after. But now the years had brought many changes besides those in the contour of her cheek and throat; and that Grandcourt should marry her had become her dominant desire. The equivocal position which she had not minded about for herself was now telling upon her through her children, whom she loved with a devotion charged with the added passion of atonement. She had no repentance except in this direction. If Grandcourt married her, the children would be none the worse off for what had passed: they would see their mother in a dignified position, and they would be at no advantage with the world: her son could be made his father's heir. It was the yearning for this result which gave the supreme importance to Grandcourt's feeling for her; her love for him had long resolved itself into anxiety that he should give her the unique, permanent claim of a wife, and she expected no other happiness in marriage than the satisfaction of her maternal love and pride – including her pride for herself in the presence of her children. For the sake of that result she was prepared even with a tragic firmness to endure anything quietly in marriage; and she had had acuteness enough to cherish Grandcourt's flickering purpose negatively, by not molesting him with passionate appeals and with scene-making. In her, as in every one else who wanted anything of him, his incalculable turns, and his tendency to harden under beseeching, had created a reasonable dread: – a slow discovery, of which no presentiment had been given in the bearing of a youthful lover with a fine line of face and the softest manners. But reticence had necessarily cost something to this impassioned woman, and she was the bitterer for it. There is no quailing – even that forced on the helpless and injured – which has not an ugly obverse: the withheld sting was gathering venom. She was absolutely dependent on Grandcourt; for though he had been always liberal in expenses for her, he had kept everything voluntary on his part; and with the goal of marriage before her, she would ask for nothing less. He had said that he would never settle anything except by will; and when she was thinking of alternatives for the future it often occurred to her that, even if she did not become Grandcourt's wife, he might never have a son who would have a legitimate claim on him, and the end might be that her son would be made heir to the best part of his estates. No son at that early age could promise to have more of his father's *physique*. But her becoming Grandcourt's wife was so far from being an extravagant notion of possibility, that even Lush had entertained it, and had said that he would as soon bet on it as on any other likelihood with regard to his familiar companion. Lush, indeed, on inferring that Grandcourt had a preconception of using his residence at Diplow in order to win Miss Arrowpoint, had thought it well to fan that project, taking it as a tacit renunciation of the marriage with Mrs Glasher, which had long been a mark for the hovering and wheeling of Grandcourt's caprice. But both prospects had been negatived by Gwendolen's appearance on the scene; and it was natural enough for Mrs Glasher to enter with eagerness into Lush's plan of hindering that new danger by setting up a barrier in the mind of the girl who was being sought as a bride. She entered into it with an eagerness which had passion in it as well as purpose, some of the stored-up venom delivering itself in that way.

After that, she had heard from Lush of Gwendolen's departure, and the probability that all danger from her was got rid of; but there had been no letter to tell her that the danger had returned and had become a certainty. She had since then written to Grandcourt as she did habitually, and he had been longer than usual in answering. She was inferring that he might intend coming to Gadsmere at the time when he was actually on the way; and she was not without hope – what construction of another's mind is not strong wishing equal to? – that a certain sickening from that frustrated courtship might dispose him to slip the more easily into the old track of intention.

Grandcourt had two grave purposes in coming to Gadsmere: to convey the news of his approaching marriage in person, in order to make this first difficulty final; and to get from Lydia his mother's diamonds, which long ago he had confided to her and wished her to wear. Her person suited diamonds and made them look as if they were worth some of the money given for them. These particular diamonds were not mountains of light – they were mere peas and haricots for the ears, neck, and hair; but they were worth some thousands, and Grandcourt necessarily wished to have them for his wife. Formerly when he had asked Lydia to put them into his keeping again, simply on the ground that they would be safer and ought to be deposited at the bank, she had quietly but absolutely refused, declaring that they were quite safe; and at last had said, 'If you ever marry another woman I will give them up to her: are you going to marry another woman?' At that time Grandcourt had no motive which urged him to persist, and he had this grace in him, that the disposition to exercise power either by cowing or disappointing others or exciting in them a rage which they dared not express – a disposition which was active in him as other propensities became languid – had always been in abeyance before Lydia. A severe interpreter might say that the mere facts of their relation to each other, the

melancholy position of this woman who depended on his will, made a standing banquet for his delight in dominating. But there was something else than this in his forbearance towards her: there was the surviving though metamorphosed effect of the power she had had over him; and it was this effect, the fitful dull lapse towards solicitations that once had the zest now missing from life, which had again and again inclined him to espouse a familiar past rather than rouse himself to the expectation of novelty. But now novelty had taken hold of him and urged him to make the most of it.

Mrs Glasher was seated in the pleasant room where she habitually passed her mornings with her children round her. It had a square projecting window and looked on broad gravel and grass, sloping towards a little brook that entered the pool. The top of a low black cabinet, the old oak table, the chairs in tawny leather, were littered with the children's toys, books, and garden garments, at which a maternal lady in pastel looked down from the walls with smiling indulgence. The children were all there. The three girls, seated round their mother near the window, were miniature portraits of her – dark-eyed, delicate-featured brunettes with a rich bloom on their cheeks, their little nostrils and eyebrows singularly finished as if they were tiny women, the eldest being barely nine. The boy was seated on the carpet at some distance, bending his blond head over the animals from a Noah's ark, admonishing them separately in a voice of threatening command, and occasionally licking the spotted ones to see if the colours would hold. Josephine, the eldest, was having her French lesson; and the others, with their dolls on their laps, sat demurely enough for images of the Madonna. Mrs Glasher's toilet had been made very carefully – each day now she said to herself that Grandcourt might come in. Her head, which, spite of emaciation, had an ineffaceable beauty in the fine profile, crisp curves of hair, and clearly-marked eyebrows, rose impressively above her bronze-coloured silk and velvet, and the gold necklace which Grandcourt had first clasped round her neck years ago. Not that she had any pleasure in her toilet; her chief thought of herself seen in the glass was, 'How changed!' – but such good in life as remained to her she would keep. If her chief wish were fulfilled, she could imagine herself getting the comeliness of a matron fit for the highest rank. The little faces beside her, almost exact reductions of her own, seemed to tell of the blooming curves which had once been where now was sunken pallor. But the children kissed the pale cheeks and never found them deficient. That love was now the one end of her life.

Suddenly Mrs Glasher turned away her head from Josephine's book and listened. 'Hush, dear! I think some one is coming.'

Henleigh the boy jumped up and said, 'Mamma, is it the miller with my donkey?'

He got no answer, and going up to his mamma's knee repeated his question in an insistent tone. But the door opened, and the servant announced Mr Grandcourt. Mrs Glasher rose in some agitation. Henleigh frowned at him in disgust at his not being the miller, and the three little girls lifted up their dark eyes to him timidly. They had none of them any particular liking for this friend of mamma's – in fact, when he had taken Mrs Glasher's hand and then turned to put his other hand on Henleigh's head, that energetic scion began to beat the friend's arm away with his fists. The little girls submitted bashfully to be patted under the chin and kissed, but on the whole it seemed better to send them into the garden, where they were presently dancing and chatting with the dogs on the gravel.

'How far are you come?' said Mrs Glasher, as Grandcourt put away his hat and overcoat.

'From Diplow,' he answered slowly, seating himself opposite her and looking at her with an unnoting gaze which she noted.

'You are tired, then.'

'No, I rested at the Junction – a hideous hole. These railway journeys are always a confounded bore. But I had coffee and smoked.'

Grandcourt drew out his handkerchief, rubbed his face, and in returning the handkerchief to his pocket looked at his crossed knee and blameless boot, as if any stranger were opposite to him, instead of a woman quivering with a suspense which every word and look of his was to incline towards hope or dread. But he was really occupied with their interview and what it was likely to include. Imagine the difference in rate of emotion between this woman whom the years had worn to a more conscious dependence and sharper eagerness, and this man whom they were dulling into a more and more neutral obstinacy.

'I expected to see you – it was so long since I had heard from you. I suppose the weeks seem longer at Gadsmere than they do at Diplow,' said Mrs Glasher. She had a quick, incisive way of speaking that seemed to go with her features, as the tone and *timbre* of a violin go with its form.

'Yes,' drawled Grandcourt. 'But you found the money paid into the bank.'

'Oh yes,' said Mrs Glasher, curtly, tingling with impatience. Always before – at least she fancied so – Grandcourt had taken more notice of her and the children than he did to-day.

'Yes,' he resumed, playing with his whisker, and at first not looking at her, 'the time has gone on at rather a rattling pace with me; generally it is slow enough. But there has been a good deal happening, as you know' – here he turned his eyes upon her.

‘What do I know?’ said she, sharply.

He left a pause before he said, without change of manner, ‘That I was thinking of marrying. You saw Miss Harleth?’

‘*She* told you that?’

The pale cheeks looked even paler, perhaps from the fierce brightness in the eyes above them.

‘No. Lush told me,’ was the slow answer. It was as if the thumbscrew and the iron-boot were being placed by creeping hands within sight of the expectant victim.

‘Good God! say at once that you are going to marry her,’ she burst out passionately, her knee shaking and her hands tightly clasped.

‘Of course, this kind of thing must happen some time or other, Lydia,’ said he; really, now the thumb-screw was on, not wishing to make the pain worse.

‘You didn’t always see the necessity.’

‘Perhaps not. I see it now.’

In those few undertoned words of Grandcourt’s she felt as absolute a resistance as if her thin fingers had been pushing at a fast-shut iron door. She knew her helplessness, and shrank from testing it by any appeal – shrank from crying in a dead ear and clinging to dead knees, only to see the immovable face and feel the rigid limbs. She did not weep nor speak: she was too hard pressed by the sudden certainty which had as much of chill sickness in it as of thought and emotion. The defeated clutch of struggling hope gave her in these first moments a horrible sensation. At last she rose with a spasmodic effort, and, unconscious of everything but her wretchedness, pressed her forehead against the hard cold glass of the window. The children, playing on the gravel, took this as a sign that she wanted them, and running forward stood in front of her with their sweet faces upturned expectantly. This roused her: she shook her head at them, waved them off, and overcome with this painful exertion sank back in the nearest chair.

Grandcourt had risen too. He was doubly annoyed – at the scene itself, and at the sense that no imperiousness of his could save him from it; but the task had to be gone through, and there was the administrative necessity of arranging things so that there should be as little annoyance as possible in future. He was leaning against the corner of the fireplace. She looked up at him and said bitterly –

‘All this is of no consequence to you. I and the children are importunate creatures. You wish to get away again and be with Miss Harleth.’

‘Don’t make the affair more disagreeable than it need be, Lydia. It is of no use to harp on things that can’t be altered. Of course it’s deucedly disagreeable to me to see you making yourself miserable. I’ve taken this journey to tell you what you must make up your mind to; – you and the children will be provided for as usual; – and there’s an end of it.’

Silence. She dared not answer. This woman with the intense eager look had had the iron of the mother’s anguish in her soul, and it had made her sometimes capable of a repression harder than shrieking and struggle. But underneath the silence there was an outlash of hatred and vindictiveness: she wished that the marriage might make two others wretched, besides herself. Presently he went on.

‘It will be better for you. You may go on living here. But I think of by-and-by settling a good sum on you and the children, and you can live where you like. There will be nothing for you to complain of then. Whatever happens, you will feel secure. Nothing could be done beforehand. Everything has gone on in a hurry.’

Grandcourt ceased his slow delivery of sentences. He did not expect her to thank him, but he considered that she might reasonably be contented; if it were possible for Lydia to be contented. She showed no change, and after a minute he said –

‘You have never had any reason to fear that I should be illiberal. I don’t care a curse about the money.’

‘If you did care about it, I suppose you would not give it us,’ said Lydia. The sarcasm was irrepressible.

‘That’s a devilishly unfair thing to say,’ Grandcourt replied, in a lower tone; ‘and I advise you not to say that sort of thing again.’

‘Should you punish me by leaving the children in beggary?’ In spite of herself, the one outlet of venom had brought the other.

‘There is no question about leaving the children in beggary,’ said Grandcourt, still in his low voice. ‘I advise you not to say things that you will repent of.’

‘I am used to repenting,’ said she, bitterly. ‘Perhaps *you* will repent. You have already repented of loving me.’

‘All this will only make it uncommonly difficult for us to meet again. What friend have you besides me?’

‘Quite true.’

The words came like a low moan. At the same moment there flashed through her the wish that after promising himself a better happiness than that he had had with her, he might feel a misery and loneliness

which would drive him back to her to find some memory of a time when he was young, glad, and hopeful. But no! he would go scathless; it was she who had to suffer.

With this the scorching words were ended. Grandcourt had meant to stay till evening; he wished to curtail his visit, but there was no suitable train earlier than the one he had arranged to go by, and he had still to speak to Lydia on the second object of his visit, which like a second surgical operation seemed to require an interval. The hours had to go by; there was eating to be done; the children came in again – all this mechanism of life had to be gone through with the dreary sense of constraint which is often felt in domestic quarrels of a commoner kind. To Lydia it was some slight relief for her stifled fury to have the children present: she felt a savage glory in their loveliness, as if it would taunt Grandcourt with his indifference to her and them – a secret darting of venom which was strongly imaginative. He acquitted himself with all the advantage of a man whose grace of bearing has long been moulded on an experience of boredom – nursed the little Antonia, who sat with her hands crossed and eyes upturned to his bald head, which struck her as worthy of observation – and propitated Henleigh by promising him a beautiful saddle and bridle. It was only the two eldest girls who had known him as a continual presence; and the intervening years had overlaid their infantine memories with a bashfulness which Grandcourt's bearing was not likely to dissipate. He and Lydia occasionally, in the presence of the servants, made a conventional remark; otherwise they never spoke; and the stagnant thought in Grandcourt's mind all the while was of his own infatuation in having given her those diamonds, which obliged him to incur the nuisance of speaking about them. He had an ingrained care for what he held to belong to his caste, and about property he liked to be lordly; also he had a consciousness of indignity to himself in having to ask for anything in the world. But however he might assert his independence of Mrs Glasher's past, he had made a past for himself which was a stronger yoke than any he could impose. He must ask for the diamonds which he had promised to Gwendolen.

At last they were alone again, with the candles above them, face to face with each other. Grandcourt looked at his watch, and then said, in an apparently indifferent drawl, 'There is one thing I had to mention, Lydia. My diamonds – you have them.'

'Yes, I have them,' she answered promptly, rising and standing with her arms thrust down and her fingers threaded, while Grandcourt sat still. She had expected the topic, and made her resolve about it. But she meant to carry out her resolve, if possible, without exasperating him. During the hours of silence she had longed to recall the words which had only widened the breach between them.

'They are in this house, I suppose?'

'No; not in this house.'

'I thought you said you kept them by you.'

'When I said so it was true. They are in the bank at Dudley.'

'Get them away, will you? I must make an arrangement for your delivering them to some one.'

'Make no arrangement. They shall be delivered to the person you intended them for. *I* will make the arrangement.'

'What do you mean?'

'What I say. I have always told you that I would give them up to your wife. I shall keep my word. She is not your wife yet.'

'This is foolery,' said Grandcourt, with undertoned disgust. It was too irritating that his indulgence of Lydia had given her a sort of mastery over him in spite of her dependent condition.

She did not speak. He also rose now, but stood leaning against the mantelpiece with his side-face towards her.

'The diamonds must be delivered to me before my marriage,' he began again.

'What is your wedding-day?'

'The tenth. There is no time to be lost.'

'And where do you go after the marriage?'

He did not reply except by looking more sullen. Presently he said, 'You must appoint a day before then, to get them from the bank and meet me – or somebody else I will commission: – it's a great nuisance. Mention a day.'

'No; I shall not do that. They shall be delivered to her safely. I shall keep my word.'

'Do you mean to say,' said Grandcourt, just audibly, turning to face her, 'that you will not do as I tell you?'

'Yes, I mean that,' was the answer that leaped out, while her eyes flashed close to him. The poor creature was immediately conscious that if her words had any effect on her own lot, the effect must be mischievous, and might nullify all the remaining advantage of her long patience. But the word had been spoken.

He was in a position the most irritating to him. He could not shake her nor touch her hostilely; and if he could, the process would not bring the diamonds. He shrank from the only sort of threat that would frighten her – if she believed it. And in general, there was nothing he hated more than to be forced into anything like

violence even in words: his will must impose itself without trouble. After looking at her for a moment, he turned his side-face towards her again, leaning as before, and said –

'Infernal idiots that women are!'

'Why will you not tell me where you are going after the marriage? I could be at the wedding if I liked, and learn in that way,' said Lydia, not shrinking from the one suicidal form of threat within her power.

'Of course, if you like, you can play the mad woman,' said Grandcourt, with *sotto voce* scorn. 'It is not to be supposed that you will wait to think what good will come of it – or what you owe to me.'

He was in a state of disgust and embitterment quite new in the history of their relation to each other. It was undeniable that this woman whose life he had allowed to send such deep suckers into his had a terrible power of annoyance in her; and the rash hurry of his proceedings had left her opportunities open. His pride saw very ugly possibilities threatening it, and he stood for several minutes in silence reviewing the situation – considering how he could act upon her. Unlike himself she was of a direct nature, with certain simple strongly-coloured tendencies, and there was one often-experienced effect which he thought he could count upon now. As Sir Hugo had said of him, Grandcourt knew how to play his cards upon occasion.

He did not speak again, but looked at his watch, rang the bell, and ordered the vehicle to be brought round immediately. Then he removed farther from her, walked as if in expectation of a summons, and remained silent without turning his eyes upon her.

She was suffering the horrible conflict of self-reproach and tenacity. She saw beforehand Grandcourt leaving her without even looking at her again – herself left behind in lonely uncertainty – hearing nothing from him – not knowing whether she had done her children harm – feeling that she had perhaps made him hate her: – all the wretchedness of a creature who had defeated her own motives. And yet she could not bear to give up a purpose which was a sweet morsel to her vindictiveness. If she had not been a mother she would willingly have sacrificed herself to her revenge – to what she felt to be the justice of hindering another from getting happiness by willingly giving her over to misery. The two dominant passions were at struggle. She must satisfy them both.

'Don't let us part in anger, Henleigh,' she began, without changing her place or attitude: 'it is a very little thing I ask. If I were refusing to give anything up that you call yours, it would be different: that would be a reason for treating me as if you hated me. But I ask such a little thing. If you will tell me where you are going on the wedding-day, I will take care that the diamonds shall be delivered to her without scandal. Without scandal,' she repeated entreatingly.

'Such preposterous whims make a woman odious,' said Grandcourt, not giving way in look or movement. 'What is the use of talking to mad people?'

'Yes, I am foolish – loneliness has made me foolish – indulge me.' Sobs rose as she spoke. 'If you will indulge me in this one folly, I will be very meek – I will never trouble you.' She burst into hysterical crying, and said again almost with a scream – 'I will be very meek after that.'

There was a strange mixture of acting and reality in this passion. She kept hold of her purpose as a child might tighten its hand over a small stolen thing, crying and denying all the while. Even Grandcourt was wrought upon by surprise: this capricious wish, this childish violence, was as unlike Lydia's bearing as it was incongruous with her person. Both had always had a stamp of dignity on them. Yet she seemed more manageable in this state than in her former attitude of defiance. He came close up to her again, and said, in his low imperious tone, 'Be quiet, and hear what I tell you. I will never forgive you if you present yourself again and make a scene.'

She pressed her handkerchief against her face, and when she could speak firmly said, in the muffled voice that follows sobbing, 'I will not – if you will let me have my way – I promise you not to thrust myself forward again. I have never broken my word to you – how many have you broken to me? When you gave me the diamonds to wear, you were not thinking of having another wife. And I now give them up – I don't reproach you – I only ask you to let me give them up in my own way. Have I not borne it well? Everything is to be taken away from me, and when I ask for a straw, a chip – you deny it me.' She had spoken rapidly, but after a little pause she said more slowly, her voice freed from its muffled tone: 'I will not bear to have it denied me.'

Grandcourt had a baffling sense that he had to deal with something like madness; he could only govern by giving way. The servant came to say the fly was ready. When the door was shut again, Grandcourt said, sullenly, 'We are going to Ryelands, then.'

'They shall be delivered to her there,' said Lydia, with decision.

'Very well, I am going.' He felt no inclination even to take her hand: she had annoyed him too sorely. But now that she had gained her point, she was prepared to humble herself that she might propitiate him.

'Forgive me; I will never vex you again,' she said, with beseeching looks. Her inward voice said distinctly – 'It is only I who have to forgive.' Yet she was obliged to ask forgiveness.

'You had better keep that promise. You have made me feel uncommonly ill with your folly,' said

Grandcourt, apparently choosing this statement as the strongest possible use of language.

'Poor thing!' said Lydia, with a faint smile: – was he aware of the minor fact that he had made her feel ill this morning?

But with the quick transition natural to her, she was now ready to coax him if he would let her, that they might part in some degree reconciled. She ventured to lay her hand on his shoulder, and he did not move away from her: she had so far succeeded in alarming him, that he was not sorry for these proofs of returned subjection.

'Light a cigar,' she said, soothingly, taking the case from his breast-pocket and opening it.

Amidst such caressing signs of mutual fear they parted. The effect that clung and gnawed within Grandcourt was a sense of imperfect mastery.

Chapter Thirty-One

A wild dedication of yourselves
To unpath'd waters, undream'd shores.

– SHAKESPEARE

On the day when Gwendolen Harleth was married and became Mrs Grandcourt, the morning was clear and bright, and while the sun was low a slight frost crisped the leaves. The bridal party was worth seeing, and half Pennicote turned out to see it, lining the pathway up to the church. An old friend of the Rector's performed the marriage ceremony, the Rector himself acting as father, to the great advantage of the procession. Only two faces, it was remarked, showed signs of sadness – Mrs Davilow's and Anna's. The mother's delicate eyelids were pink, as if she had been crying half the night; and no one was surprised that, splendid as the match was, she should feel the parting from a daughter who was the flower of her children and of her own life. It was less understood why Anna should be troubled when she was being so well set off by the bridesmaid's dress. Every one else seemed to reflect the brilliancy of the occasion – the bride most of all. Of her it was agreed that as to figure and carriage she was worthy to be a 'lady o' title:' as to face, perhaps it might be thought that a title required something more rosy; but the bridegroom himself not being fresh-coloured – being indeed, as the miller's wife observed, very much of her own husband's complexion – the match was the more complete. Anyhow he must be very fond of her; and it was to be hoped that he would never cast it up to her that she had been going out to service as a governess, and her mother to live at Sawyer's Cottage – vicissitudes which had been much spoken of in the village. The miller's daughter of fourteen could not believe that high gentry behaved badly to their wives, but her mother instructed her – 'Oh, child, men's men: gentle or simple, they're much of a muchness. I've heard my mother say Squire Pelton used to take his dogs and a long whip into his wife's room, and flog 'em there to frighten her; and my mother was lady's-maid there at the very time.'

'That's unlucky talk for a wedding, Mrs Girdle,' said the tailor. 'A quarrel may end wi' the whip, but it begins wi' the tongue, and it's the women have got the most o' that.'

'The Lord gave it 'em to use, I suppose,' said Mrs Girdle; '*He* never meant you to have it all your own way.'

'By what I can make out from the gentleman as attends to the grooming at Offendene,' said the tailor, 'this Mr Grandcourt has wonderful little tongue. Everything must be done dummy-like without his ordering.'

'Then he's the more whip, I doubt,' said Mrs Girdle. '*She's* got tongue enough, I warrant her. See, there they come out together!'

'What wonderful long corners she's got to her eyes!' said the tailor. 'She makes you feel comical when she looks at you.'

Gwendolen, in fact, never showed more elasticity in her bearing, more lustre in her long brown glance: she had the brilliancy of strong excitement, which will sometimes come even from pain. It was not pain, however, that she was feeling: she had wrought herself up to much the same condition as that in which she stood at the gambling-table when Deronda was looking at her, and she began to lose. There was enjoyment in it: whatever uneasiness a growing conscience had created, was disregarded as an ailment might have been, amidst the gratification of that ambitious vanity and desire for luxury within her which it would take a great deal of slow poisoning to kill. This morning she could not have said truly that she repented her acceptance of Grandcourt, or that any fears in hazy perspective could hinder the glowing effects of the immediate scene in which she was the central object. That she was doing something wrong – that a punishment might be hanging over her – that the woman to whom she had given a promise and broken it, was thinking of her in bitterness and misery with a just reproach – that Deronda with his way of looking into things very likely despised her for marrying Grandcourt, as he had despised her for gambling – above, all, that the cord which united her with this lover and which she had hitherto held by the hand, was now being flung over her neck, – all this yeasty mingling of dimly understood facts with vague but deep impressions, and with images half real, half fantastic, had been disturbing her during the weeks of her engagement. Was that agitating experience nullified this morning? No: it was surmounted and thrust down with a sort of exulting defiance as she felt herself standing at the game of life with many eyes upon her, daring everything to win much – or if to lose, still with *éclat* and a sense of importance. But this morning a losing destiny for herself did not press upon her as a fear: she thought that she

was entering on a fuller power of managing circumstance – with all the official strength of marriage, which some women made so poor a use of. That intoxication of youthful egoism out of which she had been shaken by trouble, humiliation, and a new sense of culpability, had returned upon her under the newly-fed strength of the old fumes. She did not in the least present the ideal of the tearful, tremulous bride. Poor Gwendolen, whom some had judged much too forward and instructed in the world's ways! – with her erect head and elastic footstep she was walking amid illusions; and yet, too, there was an under-consciousness in her that she was a little intoxicated.

'Thank God you bear it so well, my darling!' said Mrs Davilow, when she had helped Gwendolen to doff her bridal white and put on her travelling dress. All the trembling had been done by the poor mother, and her agitation urged Gwendolen doubly to take the morning as if it were a triumph.

'Why, you might have said that, if I had been going to Mrs Mompert's, you dear, sad, incorrigible mamma!' said Gwendolen, just putting her hands to her mother's cheeks with laughing tenderness – then retreating a little and spreading out her arms as if to exhibit herself. 'Here am I – Mrs Grandcourt! what else would you have me, but what I am sure to be? You know you were ready to die with vexation when you thought that I would not be Mrs Grandcourt.'

'Hush, hush, my child, for heaven's sake!' said Mrs Davilow, almost in a whisper. 'How can I help feeling it when I am parting from you. But I can bear anything gladly if you are happy.'

'Not gladly, mamma, no!' said Gwendolen, shaking her head, with a bright smile. 'Willingly you would bear it, but always sorrowfully. Sorrowing is your sauce; you can take nothing without it.' Then, clasping her mother's shoulders and raining kisses first on one cheek and then on the other between her words, she said, gaily, 'And you shall sorrow over my having everything at my beck – and enjoying everything gloriously – splendid houses – and horses – and diamonds, I shall have diamonds – and going to court – and being Lady Certainty – and Lady Perhaps – and grand here – and tantivy there – and always loving you better than anybody else in the world.'

'My sweet child! – But I shall not be jealous if you love your husband better; and he will expect to be first.'

Gwendolen thrust out her lips and chin with a pretty grimace, saying, 'Rather a ridiculous expectation. However, I don't mean to treat him ill, unless he deserves it.'

Then the two fell into a clinging embrace, and Gwendolen could not hinder a rising sob when she said, 'I wish you were going with me, mamma.'

But the slight dew on her long eyelashes only made her the more charming when she gave her hand to Grandcourt to be led to the carriage.

The Rector looked in on her to give a final 'Good-bye; God bless you; we shall see you again before long,' and then returned to Mrs Davilow saying half cheerfully, half solemnly –

'Let us be thankful, Fanny. She is in a position well suited to her, and beyond what I should have dared to hope for. And few women can have been chosen more entirely for their own sake. You should feel yourself a happy mother.'

There was a railway journey of some fifty miles before the new husband and wife reached the station near Ryelands. The sky had veiled itself since the morning, and it was hardly more than twilight when they entered the park-gates, but still Gwendolen, looking out of the carriage-window as they drove rapidly along, could see the grand outlines and the nearer beauties of the scene – the long winding drive bordered with evergreens backed by huge grey stems; then the opening of wide grassy spaces and undulations studded with dark clumps; till at last came a wide level where the white house could be seen, with a hanging wood for a background, and the rising and sinking balustrade of a terrace in front.

Gwendolen had been at her liveliest during the journey, chatting incessantly, ignoring any change in their mutual position since yesterday; and Grandcourt had been rather ecstatically quiescent, while she turned his gentle seizure of her hand into a grasp of his hand by both hers, with an increased vivacity as of a kitten that will not sit quiet to be petted. She was really getting somewhat febrile in her excitement; and now in this drive through the park her usual susceptibility to changes of light and scenery helped to make her heart palpitate newly. Was it at the novelty simply, or the almost incredible fulfilment about to be given to her girlish dreams of being 'somebody' – walking through her own furlong of corridors and under her own ceilings of an out-of-sight loftiness, where her own painted Spring was shedding painted flowers, and her own fore-shortened Zephyrs were blowing their trumpets over her; while her own servants, lackeys in clothing but men in bulk and shape, were as nought in her presence, and revered the propriety of her insolence to them: – being in short the heroine of an admired play without the pains of art? Was it alone the closeness of this fulfilment which made her heart flutter? or was it some dim forecast, the insistent penetration of suppressed experience, mixing the expectation of a triumph with the dread of a crisis? Hers was one of the natures in which exultation inevitably carries an infusion of dread ready to curdle and declare itself.

She fell silent in spite of herself as they approached the gates, and when her husband said, ‘Here we are at home!’ and for the first time kissed her on the lips, she hardly knew of it: it was no more than the passive acceptance of a greeting in the midst of an absorbing show. Was not all her hurrying life of the last three months a show, in which her consciousness was a wondering spectator? After the half-wilful excitement of the day, a numbness had come over her personality.

But there was a brilliant light in the hall – warmth, matting, carpets, full-length portraits, Olympian statues, assiduous servants. Not many servants, however: only a few from Diplow in addition to those constantly in charge of the house; and Gwendolen’s new maid, who had come with her, was taken under guidance by the housekeeper. Gwendolen felt herself being led by Grandcourt along a subtly-scented corridor, then into an ante-room where she saw an open doorway sending out a rich glow of light and colour.

‘These are our dens,’ said Grandcourt. ‘You will like to be quiet here till dinner. We shall dine early.’

He pressed her hand to his lips and moved away, more in love than he had ever expected to be.

Gwendolen, yielding up her hat and mantle, threw herself into a chair by the glowing hearth, and saw herself repeated in glass panels with all her faint-green satin surroundings. The housekeeper had passed into this boudoir from the adjoining dressing-room and seemed disposed to linger, Gwendolen thought, in order to look at the new mistress of Ryelands, who however, being impatient for solitude, said to her, ‘Will you tell Hudson when she has put out my dress to leave everything? I shall not want her again, unless I ring.’

The housekeeper, coming forward, said, ‘Here is a packet, madam, which I was ordered to give into nobody’s hands but yours, when you were alone. The person who brought it said it was a present particularly ordered by Mr Grandcourt; but he was not to know of its arrival till he saw you wear it. Excuse me, madam; I felt it right to obey orders.’

Gwendolen took the packet and let it lie on her lap till she heard the doors close. It came into her mind that the packet might contain the diamonds which Grandcourt had spoken of as being deposited somewhere and to be given to her on her marriage. In this moment of confused feeling and creeping luxurious languor she was glad of this diversion – glad of such an event as having her own diamonds to try on.

Within all the sealed paper coverings was a box, but within the box there *was* a jewel-case; and now she felt no doubt that she had the diamonds. But on opening the case, in the same instant that she saw their gleam she saw a letter lying above them. She knew the handwriting of the address. It was as if an adder had lain on them. Her heart gave a leap which seemed to have spent all her strength; and as she opened the bit of thin paper, it shook with the trembling of her hands. But it was legible as print, and thrust its words upon her.

> ‘These diamonds, which were once given with ardent love to Lydia Glasher, she passes on to you. You have broken your word to her, that you might possess what was hers. Perhaps you think of being happy, as she once was, and of having beautiful children such as hers, who will thrust hers aside. God is too just for that. The man you have married has a withered heart. His best young love was mine; you could not take that from me when you took the rest. It is dead; but I am the grave in which your chance of happiness is buried as well as mine. You had your warning. You have chosen to injure me and my children. He had meant to marry me. He would have married me at last, if you had not broken your word. You will have your punishment. I desire it with all my soul.
>
> ‘Will you give him this letter to set him against me and ruin us more – me and my children? Shall you like to stand before your husband with these diamonds on you, and these words of mine in his thoughts and yours? Will he think you have any right to complain when he has made you miserable? You took him with your eyes open. The willing wrong you have done me will be your curse.’

It seemed at first as if Gwendolen’s eyes were spell-bound in reading the horrible words of the letter over and over again as a doom of penance; but suddenly a new spasm of terror made her lean forward and stretch out the paper towards the fire, lest accusation and proof at once should meet all eyes. It flew like a feather from her trembling fingers and was caught up in the great draught of flame. In her movement the casket fell on the floor and the diamonds rolled out. She took no notice, but fell back in her chair again helpless. She could not see the reflections of herself then: they were like so many women petrified white; but coming near herself you might have seen the tremor in her lips and hands. She sat so for a long while, knowing little more than that she was feeling ill, and that those written words kept repeating themselves in her.

Truly here were poisoned gems, and the poison had entered into this poor young creature.

After that long while, there was a tap at the door and Grandcourt entered, dressed for dinner. The sight of him brought a new nervous shock, and Gwendolen screamed again and again with hysterical violence. He had expected to see her dressed and smiling, ready to be led down. He saw her pallid, shrieking as it seemed with terror, the jewels scattered around her on the floor. Was it a fit of madness?

In some form or other the Furies had crossed his threshold.

Chapter Thirty-Two

> In all ages it hath been a favourite text that a potent love hath the nature of an isolated fatality, whereto the mind's opinions and wonted resolves are altogether alien; as, for example, Daphnis his frenzy, wherein it had little availed him to have been convinced of Heraclitus his doctrine; or the philtre-bred passion of Tristan, who, though he had been as deep as Duns Scotus, would have had his reasoning marred by that cup too much; or Romeo in his sudden taking for Juliet, wherein any objections he might have held against Ptolemy had made little difference to his discourse under the balcony. Yet all love is not such, even though potent; nay, this passion hath as large scope as any for allying itself with every operation of the soul: so that it shall acknowledge an effect from the imagined light of unproven firmaments, and have its scale set to the grander orbits of what hath been and shall be.

Deronda, on his return to town, could assure Sir Hugo of his having lodged in Grandcourt's mind a distinct understanding that he could get fifty thousand pounds by giving up a prospect which was probably distant, and not absolutely certain; but he had no further sign of Grandcourt's disposition in the matter than that he was evidently inclined to keep up friendly communications.

'And what did you think of the future bride on a nearer survey?' said Sir Hugo.

'I thought better of her than I did at Leubronn. Roulette was not a good setting for her; it brought out something of the demon. At Diplow she seemed much more womanly and attractive – less hard and self-possessed. I thought her mouth and eyes had quite a different expression.'

'Don't flirt with her too much, Dan,' said Sir Hugo, meaning to be agreeably playful. 'If you make Grandcourt savage when they come to the Abbey at Christmas, it will interfere with my affairs.'

'I can stay in town, sir.'

'No, no. Lady Mallinger and the children can't do without you at Christmas. Only don't make mischief – unless you can get up a duel, and manage to shoot Grandcourt, which might be worth a little inconvenience.'

'I don't think you ever saw me flirt,' said Deronda, not amused.

'Oh, haven't I, though?' said Sir Hugo, provokingly. 'You are always looking tenderly at the women, and talking to them in a Jesuitical way. You are a dangerous young fellow – a kind of Lovelace who will make the Clarissas run after you instead of your running after them.'

What was the use of being exasperated at a tasteless joke? – only the exasperation comes before the reflection on utility. Few friendly remarks are more annoying than the information that we are always seeming to do what we never mean to do. Sir Hugo's notion of flirting, it was to be hoped, was rather peculiar; for his own part, Deronda was sure that he had never flirted. But he was glad that the baronet had no knowledge about the repurchase of Gwendolen's necklace to feed his taste for this kind of rallying.

He would be on his guard in future; for example, in his behaviour at Mrs Meyrick's, where he was about to pay his first visit since his arrival from Leubronn. For Mirah was certainly a creature in whom it was difficult not to show a tender kind of interest both by looks and speech.

Mrs Meyrick had not failed to send Deronda a report of Mirah's wellbeing in her family. 'We are getting fonder of her every day,' she had written. 'At breakfast-time we all look towards the door with expectation to see her come in; and we watch her and listen to her as if she were a native from a new country. I have not heard a word from her lips that gives me a doubt about her. She is quite contented and full of gratitude. My daughters are learning from her, and they hope to get her other pupils; for she is anxious not to eat the bread of idleness, but to work, like my girls. Mab says our life has become like a fairy tale, and all she is afraid of is that Mirah will turn into a nightingale again and fly away from us. Her voice is just perfect: not loud and strong, but searching and melting, like the thoughts of what has been. That is the way old people like me feel a beautiful voice.'

But Mrs Meyrick did not enter into particulars which would have required her to say that Amy and Mab, who had accompanied Mirah to the synagogue, found the Jewish faith less reconcilable with their wishes in her case than in that of Scott's Rebecca. They kept silence out of delicacy to Mirah, with whom her religion was too tender a subject to be touched lightly; but after a while Amy, who was much of a practical reformer, could not restrain a question.

'Excuse me, Mirah, but *does* it seem quite right to you that the women should sit behind rails in a gallery apart?'

'Yes, I never thought of anything else,' said Mirah, with mild surprise.

‘And you like better to see the men with their hats on?’ said Mab, cautiously proposing the smallest item of difference.

‘Oh yes. I like what I have always seen there, because it brings back to me the same feelings – the feelings I would not part with for anything else in the world.’

After this, any criticism, whether of doctrine or of practice, would have seemed to these generous little people an inhospitable cruelty. Mirah’s religion was of one fibre with her affections, and had never presented itself to her as a set of propositions.

‘She says herself she is a very bad Jewess, and does not half know her people’s religion,’ said Amy, when Mirah was gone to bed. ‘Perhaps it would gradually melt away from her, and she would pass into Christianity like the rest of the world, if she got to love us very much, and never found her mother. It is so strange to be of the Jews’ religion now.’

‘Oh, oh, oh!’ cried Mab. ‘I wish I were not such a hideous Christian. How can an ugly Christian, who is always dropping her work, convert a beautiful Jewess, who has not a fault?’

‘It may be wicked of me,’ said shrewd Kate, ‘but I cannot help wishing that her mother may not be found. There might be something unpleasant.’

‘I don’t think it, my dear,’ said Mrs Meyrick. ‘I believe Mirah is cut out after the pattern of her mother. And what a joy it would be to her to have such a daughter brought back again! But a mother’s feelings are not worth reckoning, I suppose’ (she shot a mischievous glance at her own daughters), ‘and a dead mother is worth more than a living one?’

‘Well, and so she may be, little mother,’ said Kate; ‘but we would rather hold you cheaper, and have you alive.’

Not only the Meyricks, whose various knowledge had been acquired by the irregular foraging to which clever girls have usually been reduced, but Deronda himself, with all his masculine instruction, had been roused by this apparition of Mirah to the consciousness of knowing hardly anything about modern Judaism or the inner Jewish history. The Chosen People have been commonly treated as a people chosen for the sake of somebody else; and their thinking as something (no matter exactly what) that ought to have been entirely otherwise; and Deronda, like his neighbours, had regarded Judaism as a sort of eccentric fossilised form which an accomplished man might dispense with studying, and leave to specialists. But Mirah, with her terrified flight from one parent, and her yearning after the other, had flashed on him the hitherto neglected reality that Judaism was something still throbbing in human lives, still making for them the only conceivable vesture of the world; and in the idling excursion on which he immediately afterwards set out with Sir Hugo he began to look for the outsides of synagogues, and the titles of books about the Jews. This wakening of a new interest – this passing from the supposition that we hold the right opinions on a subject we are careless about, to a sudden care for it, and a sense that our opinions were ignorance – is an effectual remedy for *ennui*, which unhappily cannot be secured on a physician’s prescription; but Deronda had carried it with him, and endured his weeks of lounging all the better. It was on this journey that he first entered a Jewish synagogue – at Frankfort – where his party rested on a Friday. In exploring the Juden-gasse, which he had seen long before, he remembered well enough its pictureque old houses; what his eyes chiefly dwelt on now were the human types there; and his thought, busily connecting them with the past phases of their race, stirred that fibre of historic sympathy which had helped to determine in him certain traits worth mentioning for those who are interested in his future. True, when a young man has a fine person, no eccentricity of manners, the education of a gentleman, and a present income, it is not customary to feel a prying curiosity about his way of thinking, or his peculiar tastes. He may very well be settled in life as an agreeable clever young fellow without passing a special examination on those heads. Later, when he is getting rather slovenly and portly, his peculiarities are more distinctly discerned, and it is taken as a mercy if they are not highly objectionable. But any one wishing to understand the effect of after-events on Deronda should know a little more of what he was at five-and-twenty than was evident in ordinary intercourse.

It happened that the very vividness of his impressions had often made him the more enigmatic to his friends, and had contributed to an apparent indefiniteness in his sentiments. His early-wakened sensibility and reflectiveness had developed into a many-sided sympathy, which threatened to hinder any persistent course of action: as soon as he took up any antagonism, though only in thought, he seemed to himself like the Sabine warriors in the memorable story – with nothing to meet his spear but flesh of his flesh, and objects that he loved. His imagination had so wrought itself to the habit of seeing things as they probably appeared to others, that a strong partisanship, unless it were against an immediate oppression, had become an insincerity for him. His plenteous, flexible sympathy had ended by falling into one current with that reflective analysis which tends to neutralise sympathy. Few men were able to keep themselves clearer of vices than he; yet he hated vices mildly, being used to think of them less in the abstract than as a part of mixed human natures having an individual history, which it was the bent of his mind to trace with understanding and pity. With the same

innate balance he was fervidly democratic in his feeling for the multitude, and yet, through his affections and imagination, intensely conservative; voracious of speculations on government and religion, yet loath to part with long-sanctioned forms which, for him, were quick with memories and sentiments that no argument could lay dead. We fall on the leaning side; and Deronda suspected himself of loving too well the losing causes of the world. Martyrdom changes sides, and he was in danger of changing with it, having a strong repugnance to taking up that clue of success which the order of the world often forces upon us and makes it treason against the common weal to reject. And yet his fear of falling into an unreasoning narrow hatred made a check for him: he apologised for the heirs of privilege; he shrank with dislike from the loser's bitterness and the denunciatory tone of the unaccepted innovator. A too reflective and diffusive sympathy was in danger of paralysing in him that indignation against wrong and that selectness of fellowship which are the conditions of moral force; and in the last few years of confirmed manhood he had become so keenly aware of this that what he most longed for was either some external event, or some inward light, that would urge him into a definite line of action, and compress his wandering energy. He was ceasing to care for knowledge – he had no ambition for practice – unless they could both be gathered up into one current with his emotions; and he dreaded, as if it were a dwelling-place of lost souls, that dead anatomy of culture which turns the universe into a mere ceaseless answer to queries, and knows, not everything, but everything else about everything – as if one should be ignorant of nothing concerning the scent of violets except the scent itself for which one had no nostril. But how and whence was the needed event to come? – the influence that would justify partiality, and make him what he longed to be yet was unable to make himself – an organic part of social life, instead of roaming in it like a yearning disembodied spirit, stirred with a vague social passion, but without fixed local habitation to render fellowship real? To make a little difference for the better was what he was not contented to live without; but how make it? It is one thing to see your road, another to cut it. He found some of the fault in his birth and the way he had been brought up, which had laid no special demands on him and given him no fixed relationship except one of a doubtful kind; but he did not attempt to hide from himself that he had fallen into a meditative numbness, and was gliding farther and farther from that life of practically energetic sentiment which he would have proclaimed (if he had been inclined to proclaim anything) to be the best of all life, and for himself the only life worth living. He wanted some way of keeping emotion and its progeny of sentiments – which make the savours of life – substantial and strong in the face of a reflectiveness that threatened to nullify all differences. To pound the objects of sentiment into small dust, yet keep sentiment alive and active, was something like the famous recipe for making cannon – to first take a round hole and then enclose it with iron; whatever you do keeping fast hold of your round hole. Yet how distinguish what our will may wisely save in its completeness, from the heaping of cat-mummies and the expensive cult of enshrined putrefactions?

Something like this was the common undercurrent in Deronda's mind, while he was reading law, or imperfectly attending to polite conversation. Meanwhile he had not set about one function in particular with zeal and steadiness. Not an admirable experience, to be proposed as an ideal; but a form of struggle before break of day which some young men since the patriarch have had to pass through, with more or less of bruising if not laming.

I have said that under his calm exterior he had a fervour which made him easily feel the presence of poetry in everyday events; and the forms of the Juden-gasse, rousing the sense of union with what is remote, set him musing on two elements of our historic life which that sense raises into the same region of poetry: – the faint beginnings of faiths and institutions, and their obscure lingering decay; the dust and withered remnants with which they are apt to be covered, only enhancing for the awakened perception the impressiveness either of a sublimely penetrating life, as in the twin green leaves that will become the sheltering tree, or of a pathetic inheritance in which all the grandeur and the glory have become a sorrowing memory.

This imaginative stirring, as he turned out of the Juden-gasse, and continued to saunter in the warm evening air, meaning to find his way to the synagogue, neutralised the repellent effect of certain ugly little incidents on his way. Turning into an old book-shop to ask the exact time of service at the synagogue, he was affectionately directed by a precocious Jewish youth, who entered cordially into his wanting not the fine new building of the Reformed but the old Rabbinical school of the orthodox; and then cheated him like a pure Teuton, only with more amenity, in his charge for a book quite out of request as one 'nicht so leicht zu bekommen.'[11] Meanwhile at the opposite counter a deaf and grisly tradesman was casting a flinty look at certain cards, apparently combining advantages of business with religion, and shoutingly proposed to him in Jew-dialect by a dingy man in a tall coat hanging from neck to heel, a bag in hand, and a broad low hat surmounting his chosen nose – who had no sooner disappeared than another dingy man of the same pattern issued from the backward glooms of the shop and also shouted in the same dialect. In fact, Deronda saw various queer-looking Israelites not altogether without guile, and just distinguishable from queer-looking Christians of the same mixed *morale*. In his anxiety about Mirah's relatives, he had lately been thinking of

vulgar Jews with a sort of personal alarm. But a little comparison will often diminish our surprise and disgust at the aberrations of Jews and other dissidents whose lives do not offer a consistent or lovely pattern of their creed; and this evening Deronda, becoming more conscious that he was falling into unfairness and ridiculous exaggeration, began to use that corrective comparison: he paid his thaler too much, without prejudice to his interests in the Hebrew destiny, or his wish to find the *Rabbinische Schule*, which he arrived at by sunset, and entered with a good congregation of men.

He happened to take his seat in a line with an elderly man from whom he was distant enough to glance at him more than once as rather a noticeable figure – his ample white beard and felt hat framing a profile of that fine contour which may as easily be Italian as Hebrew. He returned Deronda's notice till at last their eyes met: an undesirable chance with unknown persons, and a reason to Deronda for not looking again; but he immediately found an open prayer-book pushed towards him and had to bow his thanks. However, the congregation had mustered, the reader had mounted to the *almemor* or platform, and the service began. Deronda, having looked enough at the German translation of the Hebrew in the book before him to know that he was chiefly hearing Psalms and Old Testament passages or phrases, gave himself up to that strongest effect of chanted liturgies which is independent of detailed verbal meaning – like the effect of an Allegri's *Miserere* or a Palestrina's *Magnificat*. The most powerful movement of feeling with a liturgy is the prayer which seeks for nothing special, but is a yearning to escape from the limitations of our own weakness and an invocation of all Good to enter and abide with us; or else a self-oblivious lifting up of gladness, a *Gloria in excelsis* that such Good exists; both the yearning and the exultation gathering their utmost force from the sense of communion in a form which has expressed them both, for long generations of struggling fellow-men. The Hebrew liturgy, like others, has its transitions of litany, lyric, proclamation, dry statement and blessing; but this evening all were one for Deronda: the chant of the *Chazan's* or Reader's grand wide-ranging voice with its passage from monotony to sudden cries, the outburst of sweet boys' voices from the little quire, the devotional swaying of men's bodies backwards and forwards, the very commonness of the building and shabbiness of the scene where a national faith, which had penetrated the thinking of half the world, and moulded the splendid forms of that world's religion, was finding a remote, obscure echo – all were blent for him as one expression of a binding history, tragic and yet glorious. He wondered at the strength of his own feeling; it seemed beyond the occasion – what one might imagine to be a divine influx in the darkness, before there was any vision to interpret. The whole scene was a coherent strain, its burthen a passionate regret, which, if he had known the liturgy for the Day of Reconciliation, he might have clad in its antithetic burthen: 'Happy the eye which saw all these things; but verily to hear only of them afflicts our soul. Happy the eye that saw our temple and the joy of our congregation; but verily to hear only of them afflicts our soul. Happy the eye that saw the fingers when tuning every kind of song; but verily to hear only of them afflicts our soul.'

But with the cessation of the devotional sounds and the movement of many indifferent faces and vulgar figures before him there darted into his mind the frigid idea that he had probably been alone in his feeling, and perhaps the only person in the congregation for whom the service was more than a dull routine. There was just time for this chilling thought before he had bowed to his civil neighbour and was moving away with the rest – when he felt a hand on his arm, and turning with the rather unpleasant sensation which this abrupt sort of claim is apt to bring, he saw close to him the white-bearded face of that neighbour, who said to him in German, 'Excuse me, young gentleman – allow me – what is your parentage – your mother's family – her maiden name?'

Deronda had a strongly resistant feeling: he was inclined to shake off hastily the touch on his arm; but he managed to slip it away and said coldly, 'I am an Englishman.'

The questioner looked at him dubiously still for an instant, then just lifted his hat and turned away – whether under a sense of having made a mistake or of having been repulsed, Deronda was uncertain. In his walk back to the hotel he tried to still any uneasiness on the subject by reflecting that he could not have acted differently. How could he say that he did not know the name of his mother's family to that total stranger? – who indeed had taken an unwarrantable liberty in the abruptness of his question, dictated probably by some fancy of likeness such as often occurs without real significance. The incident, he said to himself, was trivial; but whatever import it might have, his inward shrinking on the occasion was too strong for him to be sorry that he had cut it short. It was a reason however for his not mentioning the synagogue to the Mallingers – in addition to his usual inclination to reticence on anything that the baronet would have been likely to call Quixotic enthusiasm. Hardly any man could be more good-natured than Sir Hugo; indeed in his kindliness, especially to women, he did actions which others would have called romantic; but he never took a romantic view of them, and in general smiled at the introduction of motives on a grand scale, or of reasons that lay very far off. This was the point of strongest difference between him and Deronda, who rarely ate his breakfast without some silent discursive flight after grounds for filling up his day according to the practice of his contemporaries.

This halt at Frankfort was taken on their way home, and its impressions were kept the more actively vibrating in him by the duty of caring for Mirah's welfare. That question about his parentage, which if he had not both inwardly and outwardly shaken it off as trivial, would have seemed a threat rather than a promise of revelation, had reinforced his anxiety as to the effect of finding Mirah's relatives and his resolve to proceed with caution. If he made any unpleasant discovery, was he bound to a disclosure that might cast a new net of trouble around her?

He had written to Mrs Meyrick to announce his visit at four o'clock, and he found Mirah seated at work with only Mrs Meyrick and Mab, the open piano, and all the glorious company of engravings. The dainty neatness of her hair and dress, the glow of tranquil happiness in a face where a painter need have changed nothing if he had wanted to put it in front of the host singing 'peace on earth and goodwill to men,' made a contrast to his first vision of her that was delightful to Deronda's eyes. Mirah herself was thinking of it, and immediately on their greeting said –

'See how different I am from that miserable creature by the river! – all because you found me and brought me to the very best.'

'It was my good chance to find you,' said Deronda. 'Any other man would have been glad to do what I did.'

'That is not the right way of thinking about it,' said Mirah, shaking her head with decisive gravity. 'I think of what really was. It was you, and not another, who found me, and were good to me.'

'I agree with Mirah,' said Mrs Meyrick. 'Saint Anybody is a bad saint to pray to.'

'Besides, Anybody could not have brought me to you,' said Mirah, smiling at Mrs Meyrick. 'And I would rather be with you than with any one else in the world except my mother. I wonder if ever a poor little bird, that was lost and could not fly, was taken and put into a warm nest where there was a mother and sisters who took to it so that everything came naturally, as if it had been always there. I hardly thought before that the world could ever be as happy and without fear as it is to me now.' She looked meditative a moment, and then said, 'Sometimes I am a *little* afraid.'

'What is it you are afraid of?' said Deronda, with anxiety.

'That when I am turning at the corner of a street I may meet my father. It seems dreadful that I should be afraid of meeting him. That is my only sorrow,' said Mirah, plaintively.

'It is surely not very probable,' said Deronda, wishing that it were less so; then, not to let the opportunity escape – 'Would it be a great grief to you now, if you were never to meet your mother?'

She did not answer immediately, but meditated again, with her eyes fixed on the opposite wall. Then she turned them on Deronda and said firmly, as if she had arrived at the exact truth, 'I want her to know that I have always loved her, and if she is alive I want to comfort her. She may be dead. If she were, I should long to know where she was buried; and to know whether my brother lives, so that we can remember her together. But I will try not to grieve. I have thought much for so many years of her being dead. And I shall have her with me in my mind, as I have always had. We can never be really parted. I think I have never sinned against her. I have always tried not to do what would hurt her. Only she might be sorry that I was not a good Jewess.'

'In what way are you not a good Jewess?' said Deronda.

'I am ignorant, and we never observed the laws, but lived among Christians just as they did. But I have heard my father laugh at the strictness of the Jews about their food and all customs, and their not liking Christians. I think my mother was strict; but she could never want me not to like those who are better to me than any of my own people I have ever known. I think I could obey in other things that she wished, but not in that. It is so much easier to me to share in love than in hatred. I remember a play I read in German – since I have been here, it has come into my mind – where the heroine says something like that.'

'Antigone,' said Deronda.

'Ah, you know it. But I do not believe that my mother would wish me not to love my best friends. She would be grateful to them.' Here Mirah had turned to Mrs Meyrick, and with a sudden lighting up of her whole countenance she said, 'Oh, if we ever do meet and know each other as we are now, so that I could tell what would comfort her – I should be so full of blessedness, my soul would know no want but to love her!'

'God bless you, child!' said Mrs Meyrick, the words escaping involuntarily from her motherly heart. But to relieve the strain of feeling she looked at Deronda and said, 'It is curious that Mirah, who remembers her mother so well, it is as if she saw her, cannot recall her brother the least bit – except the feeling of having been carried by him when she was tired, and of his being near her when she was in her mother's lap. It must be that he was rarely at home. He was already grown up. It is a pity her brother should be quite a stranger to her.'

'He is good; I feel sure Ezra is good,' said Mirah, eagerly. 'He loved my mother – he would take care of her. I remember more of him than that. I remember my mother's voice once calling, "Ezra!" and then his answering from the distance, "Mother!" ' – Mirah had changed her voice a little in each of these words and had given them a loving intonation – 'and then he came close to us. I feel sure he is good. I have always taken

comfort from that.'

It was impossible to answer this either with agreement or doubt. Mrs Meyrick and Deronda exchanged a quick glance: about this brother she felt as painfully dubious as he did. But Mirah went on, absorbed in her memories –

'Is it not wonderful how I remember the voices better than anything else? I think they must go deeper into us than other things. I have often fancied heaven might be made of voices.'

'Like your singing – yes,' said Mab, who had hitherto kept a modest silence, and now spoke bashfully, as was her wont in the presence of Prince Camaralzaman, – 'Ma, do ask Mirah to sing. Mr Deronda has not heard her.'

'Would it be disagreeable to you to sing now?' said Deronda, with a more deferential gentleness than he had ever been conscious of before.

'Oh, I shall like it,' said Mirah. 'My voice has come back a little with rest.'

Perhaps her ease of manner was due to something more than the simplicity of her nature. The circumstances of her life had made her think of everything she did as work demanded from her, in which affectation had nothing to do; and she had begun her work before self-consciousness was born.

She immediately rose and went to the piano – a somewhat worn instrument that seemed to get the better of its infirmities under the firm touch of her small fingers as she preluded. Deronda placed himself where he could see her while she sang; and she took everything as quietly as if she had been a child going to breakfast.

Imagine her – it is always good to imagine a human creature in whom bodily loveliness seems as properly one with the entire being as the bodily loveliness of those wondrous transparent orbs of life that we find in the sea – imagine her with her dark hair brushed from her temples, but yet showing certain tiny rings there which had cunningly found their own way back, the mass of it hanging behind just to the nape of the little neck in curly fibres, such as renew themselves at their own will after being bathed into straightness like that of water-grasses. Then see the perfect cameo her profile makes, cut in a duskish shell where by some happy fortune there pierced a gem-like darkness for the eye and eyebrow; the delicate nostrils defined enough to be ready for sensitive movements, the finished ear, the firm curves of the chin and neck entering into the expression of a refinement which was not feebleness.

She sang Beethoven's 'Per pietà non dirmi addio,' with a subdued but searching pathos which had that essential of perfect singing, the making one oblivious of art or manner, and only possessing one with the song. It was the sort of voice that gives the impression of being meant like a bird's wooing for an audience near and beloved. Deronda began by looking at her, but felt himself presently covering his eyes with his hand, wanting to seclude the melody in darkness; then he refrained from what might seem oddity, and was ready to meet the look of mute appeal which she turned towards him at the end.

'I think I never enjoyed a song more than that,' he said, gratefully.

'You like my singing? I am so glad,' she said, with a smile of delight. 'It has been a great pain to me, because it failed in what it was wanted for. But now we think I can use it to get my bread. I have really been taught well. And now I have two pupils, that Miss Meyrick found for me. They pay me nearly two crowns for their two lessons.'

'I think I know some ladies who would find you many pupils after Christmas,' said Deronda. 'You would not mind singing before any one who wished to hear you?'

'Oh no, I want to do something to get money. I could teach reading and speaking, Mrs Meyrick thinks. But if no one would learn of me, that is difficult.' Mirah smiled with a touch of merriment he had not seen in her before. 'I daresay I should find her poor – I mean my mother. I should want to get money for her. And I cannot always live on charity; though' – here she turned so as to take all three of her companions in one glance – 'it is the sweetest charity in all the world.'

'I should think you can get rich,' said Deronda, smiling. 'Great ladies will perhaps like you to teach their daughters. We shall see. But now do sing again to us.'

She went on willingly, singing with ready memory various things by Gordigiani and Schubert; then, when she had left the piano, Mab said, entreatingly, 'Oh Mirah, if you would not mind singing the little hymn.'

'It is too childish,' said Mirah. 'It is like lisping.'

'What is the hymn?' said Deronda.

'It is the Hebrew hymn she remembers her mother singing over her when she lay in her cot,' said Mrs Meyrick.

'I should like very much to hear it,' said Deronda, 'if you think I am worthy to hear what is so sacred.'

'I will sing it if you like,' said Mirah, 'but I don't sing real words – only here and there a syllable like hers – the rest is lisping. Do you know Hebrew? because if you do, my singing will seem childish nonsense.'

Deronda shook his head. 'It will be quite good Hebrew to me.'

Mirah crossed her little feet and hands in her easiest attitude, and then lifted up her head at an angle which

seemed to be directed to some invisible face bent over her, while she sang a little hymn of quaint melancholy intervals, with syllables that really seemed childish lisping to her audience; but the voice in which she gave it forth had gathered even a sweeter, more cooing tenderness than was heard in her other songs.

'If I were ever to know the real words, I should still go on in my old way with them,' said Mirah, when she had repeated the hymn several times.

'Why not?' said Deronda. 'The lisped syllables are very full of meaning.'

'Yes, indeed,' said Mrs Meyrick. 'A mother hears something like a lisp in her children's talk to the very last. Their words are not just what everybody else says, though they may be spelt the same. If I were to live till my Hans got old, I should still see the boy in him. A mother's love, I often say, is like a tree that has got all the wood in it, from the very first it made.'

'Is not that the way with friendship, too?' said Deronda, smiling. 'We must not let mothers be too arrogant.'

The bright little woman shook her head over her darning.

'It is easier to find an old mother than an old friend. Friendships begin with liking or gratitude – roots that can be pulled up. Mother's love begins deeper down.'

'Like what you were saying about the influence of voices,' said Deronda, looking at Mirah. 'I don't think your hymn would have had more expression for me if I had known the words. I went to the synagogue at Frankfort before I came home, and the service impressed me just as much as if I had followed the words – perhaps more.'

'Oh, was it great to you? Did it go to your heart?' said Mirah, eagerly. 'I thought none but our people would feel that. I thought it was all shut away like a river in a deep valley, where only heaven saw – I mean –' she hesitated, feeling that she could not disentangle her thought from its imagery.

'I understand,' said Deronda. 'But there is not really such a separation – deeper down, as Mrs Meyrick says. Our religion is chiefly a Hebrew religion; and since Jews are men, their religious feelings must have much in common with those of other men – just as their poetry, though in one sense peculiar, has a great deal in common with the poetry of other nations. Still it is to be expected that a Jew would feel the forms of his people's religion more than one of another race – and yet' – here Deronda hesitated in his turn – 'that is perhaps not always so.'

'Ah no,' said Mirah, sadly. 'I have seen that. I have seen them mock. Is it not like mocking your parents? – like rejoicing in your parents' shame?'

'Some minds naturally rebel against whatever they were brought up in, and like the opposite: they see the faults in what is nearest to them,' said Deronda, apologetically.

'But you are not like that,' said Mirah, looking at him with unconscious fixedness.

'No, I think not,' said Deronda; 'but you know I was not brought up as a Jew.'

'Ah, I am always forgetting,' said Mirah, with a look of disappointed recollection, and slightly blushing.

Deronda also felt rather embarrassed, and there was an awkward pause, which he put an end to by saying playfully –

'Whichever way we take it, we have to tolerate each other; for if we all went in opposition to our teaching, we must end in difference, just the same.'

'To be sure. We should go on for ever in zigzags,' said Mrs Meyrick. 'I think it is very weakminded to make your creed up by the rule of contrary. Still one may honour one's parents, without following their notions exactly, any more than the exact cut of their clothing. My father was a Scotch Calvinist and my mother was a French Calvinist: I am neither quite Scotch, nor quite French, nor two Calvinists rolled into one, yet I honour my parents' memory.'

'But I could not make myself not a Jewess,' said Mirah, insistently, 'even if I changed my belief.'

'No, my dear. But if Jews and Jewesses went on changing their religion, and making no difference between themselves and Christians, there would come a time when there would be no Jews to be seen,' said Mrs Meyrick, taking that consummation very cheerfully.

'Oh, please not to say that,' said Mirah, the tears gathering. 'It is the first unkind thing you ever said. I will not begin that. I will never separate myself from my mother's people. I was forced to fly from my father; but if he came back in age and weakness and want, and needed me, should I say, "This is not my father"? If he had shame, I must share it. It was he who was given to me for my father, and not another. And so it is with my people. I will always be a Jewess. I will love Christians when they are good, like you. But I will always cling to my people. I will always worship with them.'

As Mirah had gone on speaking she had become possessed with a sorrowful passion – fervent, not violent. Holding her little hands tightly clasped and looking at Mrs Meyrick with beseeching, she seemed to Deronda a personification of that spirit which impelled men after a long inheritance of professed Catholicism to leave wealth and high place, and risk their lives in flight, that they might join their own people and say, 'I am a Jew.'

‘Mirah, Mirah, my dear child, you mistake me!’ said Mrs Meyrick, alarmed. ‘God forbid I should want you to do anything against your conscience. I was only saying what might be if the world went on. But I had better have left the world alone, and not wanted to be over-wise. Forgive me, come! we will not try to take you from anybody you feel has more right to you.’

‘I would do anything else for you. I owe you my life,’ said Mirah, not yet quite calm.

‘Hush, hush, now,’ said Mrs Meyrick. ‘I have been punished enough for wagging my tongue foolishly – making an almanac for the Millennium, as my husband used to say.’

‘But everything in the world must come to an end some time. We must bear to think of that,’ said Mab, unable to hold her peace on this point. She had already suffered from a bondage of tongue which threatened to become severe if Mirah were to be too much indulged in this inconvenient susceptibility to innocent remarks.

Deronda smiled at the irregular, blonde face, brought into strange contrast by the side of Mirah’s – smiled, Mab thought, rather sarcastically as he said, ‘That prospect of everything coming to an end will not guide us far in practice. Mirah’s feelings, she tells us, are concerned with what is.’

Mab was confused and wished she had not spoken, since Mr Deronda seemed to think that she had found fault with Mirah; but to have spoken once is a tyrannous reason for speaking again, and she said –

‘I only meant that we must have courage to hear things, else there is hardly anything we can talk about.’ Mab felt herself unanswerable here, inclining to the opinion of Socrates: ‘What motive has a man to live, if not for the pleasures of discourse?’

Deronda took his leave soon after, and when Mrs Meyrick went outside with him to exchange a few words about Mirah, he said, ‘Hans is to share my chambers when he comes at Christmas.’

‘You have written to Rome about that?’ said Mrs Meyrick, her face lighting up. ‘How very good and thoughtful of you! You mentioned Mirah, then?’

‘Yes, I referred to her. I concluded he knew everything from you.’

‘I must confess my folly. I have not yet written a word about her. I have always been meaning to do it, and yet have ended my letter without saying a word. And I told the girls to leave it to me. However! – Thank you a thousand times.’

Deronda divined something of what was in the mother’s mind, and his divination reinforced a certain anxiety already present in him. His inward colloquy was not soothing. He said to himself that no man could see this exquisite creature without feeling it possible to fall in love with her; but all the fervour of his nature was engaged on the side of precaution. There are personages who feel themselves tragic because they march into a palpable morass, dragging another with them, and then cry out against all the gods. Deronda’s mind was strongly set against imitating them.

‘I have my hands on the reins now,’ he thought, ‘and I will not drop them. I shall go there as little as possible.’

He saw the reasons acting themselves out before him. How could he be Mirah’s guardian and claim to unite with Mrs Meyrick, to whose charge he had committed her, if he showed himself as a lover – whom she did not love – whom she would not marry? And if he encouraged any germ of lover’s feeling in himself it would lead up to that issue. Mirah’s was not a nature that would bear dividing against itself; and even if love won her consent to marry a man who was not of her race and religion, she would never be happy in acting against that strong native bias which would still reign in her conscience as remorse.

Deronda saw these consequences as we see any danger of marring our own work well begun. It was a delight to have rescued this child acquainted with sorrow, and to think of having placed her little feet in protected paths. The creature we help to save, though only a half-reared linnet, bruised and lost by the wayside – how we watch and fence it, and dote on its signs of recovery! Our pride becomes loving, our self is a not-self for whose sake we become virtuous, when we set to some hidden work of reclaiming a life from misery and look for our triumph in the secret joy – ‘This one is the better for me.’

‘I would as soon hold out my finger to be bitten off as set about spoiling her peace,’ said Deronda. ‘It was one of the rarest bits of fortune that I should have had friends like the Meyricks to place her with – generous, delicate friends without any loftiness in their ways, so that her dependence on them is not only safety but happiness. There could be no refuge to replace that, if it were broken up. But what is the use of my taking the vows and settling everything as it should be, if that marplot Hans comes and upsets it all?’

Few things were more likely. Hans was made for mishaps: his very limbs seemed more breakable than other people’s – his eyes more of a resort for uninvited flies and other irritating guests. But it was impossible to forbid Hans’s coming to London. He was intending to get a studio there and make it his chief home; and to propose that he should defer coming on some ostensible ground, concealing the real motive of winning time for Mirah’s position to become more confirmed and independent, was impracticable. Having no other resource Deronda tried to believe that both he and Mrs Meyrick were foolishly troubling themselves about one of those

endless things called probabilities, which never occur; but he did not quite succeed in his trying; on the contrary, he found himself going inwardly through a scene where on the first discovery of Hans's inclination, he gave him a very energetic warning – suddenly checked, however, by the suspicion of personal feeling that his warmth might be creating in Hans. He could come to no result, but that the position was peculiar, and that he could make no further provision against dangers until they came nearer. To save an unhappy Jewess from drowning herself, would not have seemed a startling variation among police reports; but to discover in her so rare a creature as Mirah, was an exceptional event which might well bring exceptional consequences. Deronda would not let himself for a moment dwell on any supposition that the consequences might enter deeply into his own life. The image of Mirah had never yet had that penetrating radiation which would have been given to it by the idea of her loving him. When this sort of effluence is absent from the fancy (whether from the fact or not) a man may go far in devotedness without perturbation.

As to the search for Mirah's mother and brother, Deronda took what she had said to-day as a warrant for deferring any immediate measures. His conscience was not quite easy in this desire for delay, any more than it was quite easy in his not attempting to learn the truth about his own mother: in both cases he felt that there might be an unfulfilled duty to a parent, but in both cases there was an overpowering repugnance to the possible truth, which threw a turning weight into the scale of argument.

'At least, I will look about,' was his final determination. 'I may find some special Jewish machinery. I will wait till after Christmas.'

What should we all do without the calendar, when we want to put off a disagreeable duty? The admirable arrangements of the solar system, by which our time is measured, always supply us with a term before which it is hardly worth while to set about anything we are disinclined to.

Chapter Thirty-Three

> 'No man,' says a Rabbi, by way of indisputable instance, 'may turn the bones of his father and mother into spoons' – sure that his hearers felt the checks against that form of economy. The market for spoons has never expanded enough for any one to say, 'Why not?' and to argue that human progress lies in such an application of material. The only check to be alleged is a sentiment, which will coerce none who do not hold that sentiments are the better part of the world's wealth.

Deronda meanwhile took to a less fashionable form of exercise than riding in Rotten Row. He went often rambling in those parts of London which are most inhabited by common Jews: he walked to the synagogues at times of service, he looked into shops, he observed faces: – a process not very promising of particular discovery. Why did he not address himself to an influential Rabbi or other member of a Jewish community, to consult on the chances of finding a mother named Cohen, with a son named Ezra, and a lost daughter named Mirah? He thought of doing so – after Christmas. The fact was, notwithstanding all his sense of poetry in common things, Deronda, where a keen personal interest was aroused, could not, more than the rest of us, continuously escape suffering from the pressure of that hard unaccommodating Actual, which has never consulted our taste and is entirely unselect. Enthusiasm, we know, dwells at ease among ideas, tolerates garlic breathed in the middle ages, and sees no shabbiness in the official trappings of classic processions: it gets squeamish when ideals press upon it as something warmly incarnate, and can hardly face them without fainting. Lying dreamily in a boat, imagining one's self in quest of a beautiful maiden's relatives in Cordova elbowed by Jews in the time of Ibn-Gebirol, all the physical incidents can be borne without shock. Or if the scenery of St Mary Axe and Whitechapel were imaginatively transported to the borders of the Rhine at the end of the eleventh century, when in the ears listening for the signals of the Messiah, the Hep! Hep! Hep! of the Crusaders came like the bay of bloodhounds; and in the presence of those devilish missionaries with sword and firebrand the crouching figure of the reviled Jew turned round erect, heroic, flashing with sublime constancy in the face of torture and death – what would the dingy shops and unbeautiful faces signify to the thrill of contemplative emotion? But the fervour of sympathy with which we contemplate a grandiose martyrdom is feeble compared with the enthusiasm that keeps unslacked where there is no danger, no challenge – nothing but impartial midday falling on commonplace, perhaps half-repulsive, objects which are really the beloved ideas made flesh. Here undoubtedly lies the chief poetic energy: – in the force of imagination that pierces or exalts the solid fact, instead of floating among cloud-pictures. To glory in a prophetic vision of knowledge covering the earth, is an easier exercise of believing imagination than to see its beginning in newspaper placards, staring at you from a bridge beyond the corn-fields; and it might well happen to most of us dainty people that we were in the thick of the battle of Armageddon without being aware of anything more than the annoyance of a little explosive smoke and struggling on the ground immediately about us.

It lay in Deronda's nature usually to contemn the feeble, fastidious sympathy which shrinks from the broad life of mankind; but now, with Mirah before him as a living reality whose experience he had to care for, he saw every common Jew and Jewess in the light of comparison with her, and had a presentiment of the collision between her idea of the unknown mother and brother and the discovered fact – a presentiment all the keener in him because of a suppressed consciousness that a not unlike possibility of collision might lie hidden in his own lot. Not that he would have looked with more complacency of expectation at wealthy Jews, outdoing the lords of the Philistines in their sports; but since there was no likelihood of Mirah's friends being found among that class, their habits did not immediately affect him. In this mood he rambled, without expectation of a more pregnant result than a little preparation of his own mind, perhaps for future theorising as well as practice – very much as if, Mirah being related to Welsh miners, he had gone to look more closely at the ways of those people, not without wishing at the same time to get a little light of detail on the history of Strikes.

He really did not long to find anybody in particular; and when, as his habit was, he looked at the name over a shop-door, he was well content that it was not Ezra Cohen. I confess, he particularly desired that Ezra Cohen should not keep a shop. Wishes are held to be ominous; according to which belief the order of the world is so arranged that if you have an impious objection to a squint, your offspring is the more likely to be born with one; also, that if you happened to desire a squint, you would not get it. This desponding view of probability

the hopeful entirely reject, taking their wishes as good and sufficient security for all kinds of fulfilment. Who is absolutely neutral? Deronda happening one morning to turn into a little side street out of the noise and obstructions of Holborn, felt the scale dip on the desponding side.

He was rather tired of the streets and had paused to hail a hansom cab which he saw coming, when his attention was caught by some fine old clasps in chased silver displayed in the window at his right hand. His first thought was that Lady Mallinger, who had a strictly Protestant taste for such Catholic spoils, might like to have these missal-clasps turned into a bracelet; then his eyes travelled over the other contents of the window, and he saw that the shop was that kind of pawnbroker's where the lead is given to jewellery, lace, and all equivocal objects introduced as *bric-a-brac*. A placard in one corner announced – *Watches and Jewellery exchanged and repaired*. But his survey had been noticed from within, and a figure appeared at the door, looking round at him, and saying in a tone of cordial encouragement, 'Good day, sir.' The instant was enough for Deronda to see that the face, unmistakeably Jewish, belonged to a young man about thirty; and wincing from the shopkeeper's persuasiveness that would probably follow, he had no sooner returned the 'good day,' than he passed to the other side of the street and beckoned to the cabman to draw up there. From that station he saw the name over the shop-window – *Ezra Cohen*.

There might be a hundred Ezra Cohens lettered above shop-windows, but Deronda had not seen them. Probably the young man interested in a possible customer was Ezra himself; and he was about the age to be expected in Mirah's brother, who was grown up while she was still a little child. But Deronda's first endeavour as he drove homewards was to convince himself that there was not the slightest warrantable presumption of this Ezra being Mirah's brother; and next, that even if, in spite of good reasoning, he turned out to be that brother, while on inquiry the mother was found to be dead, it was not his – Deronda's – duty to make known the discovery to Mirah. In inconvenient disturbance of this conclusion there came his lately-acquired knowledge that Mirah would have a religious desire to know of her mother's death, and also to learn whether her brother were living. How far was he justified in determining another life by his own notions? Was it not his secret complaint against the way in which others had ordered his own life, that he had not open daylight on all its relations, so that he had not, like other men, the full guidance of primary duties?

The immediate relief from this inward debate was the reflection that he had not yet made any real discovery, and that by looking into the facts more closely he should be certified that there was no demand on him for any decision whatever. He intended to return to that shop as soon as he could conveniently, and buy the clasps for Lady Mallinger. But he was hindered for several days by Sir Hugo, who, about to make an after-dinner speech on a burning topic, wanted Deronda to forage for him on the legal part of the question, besides wasting time every day on argument which always ended in a drawn battle. As on many other questions, they held different sides; but Sir Hugo did not mind this, and when Deronda put his point well said, with a mixture of satisfaction and regret –

'Confound it, Dan! why don't you make an opportunity of saying these things in public? You're wrong, you know. You won't succeed. You've got the massive sentiment – the heavy artillery of the country against you. But it's all the better ground for a young man to display himself on. When I was your age, I should have taken it. And it would be quite as well for you to be in opposition to me here and there. It would throw you more into relief. If you would seize an occasion of this sort to make an impression, you might be in Parliament in no time. And you know that would gratify me.'

'I am sorry not to do what would gratify you, sir,' said Deronda. 'But I cannot persuade myself to look at politics as a profession.'

'Why not? If a man is not born into public life by his position in the country, there's no way for him but to embrace it by his own efforts. The business of the country must be done – her Majesty's Government carried on, as the old Duke said. And it never could be, my boy, if everybody looked at politics as if they were prophecy, and demanded an inspired vocation. If you are to get into Parliament, it won't do to sit still and wait for a call either from heaven or constituents.'

'I don't want to make a living out of opinions,' said Deronda; 'especially out of borrowed opinions. Not that I mean to blame other men. I daresay many better fellows than I don't mind getting on to a platform to praise themselves, and giving their word of honour for a party.'

'I'll tell you what, Dan,' said Sir Hugo, 'a man who sets his face against every sort of humbug is simply a three-cornered, impracticable fellow. There's a bad style of humbug, but there is also a good style – one that oils the wheels and makes progress possible. If you are to rule men, you must rule them through their own ideas; and I agree with the Archbishop at Naples who had a St Januarius procession against the plague. It's no use having an Order in Council against popular shallowness. There is no action possible without a little acting.'

'One may be obliged to give way to an occasional necessity,' said Deronda. 'But it is one thing to say, "In this particular case I am forced to put on this foolscap and grin," and another to buy a pocket foolscap and

practise myself in grinning. I can't see any real public expediency that does not keep an ideal before it which makes a limit of deviation from the direct path. But if I were to set up for a public man I might mistake my own success for public expediency.'

It was after this dialogue, which was rather jarring to him, that Deronda set out on his meditated second visit to Ezra Cohen's. He entered the street at the end opposite to the Holborn entrance, and an inward reluctance slackened his pace while his thoughts were transferring what he had just been saying about public expediency to the entirely private difficulty which brought him back again into this unattractive thoroughfare. It might soon become an immediate practical question with him how far he could call it a wise expediency to conceal the fact of close kindred. Such questions turning up constantly in life are often decided in a rough and ready way; and to many it will appear an over-refinement in Deronda that he should make any great point of a matter confined to his own knowledge. But we have seen the reasons why he had come to regard concealment as a bane of life, and the necessity of concealment as a mark by which lines of action were to be avoided. The prospect of being urged against the confirmed habit of his mind was naturally grating. He even paused here and there before the most plausible shop-windows for a gentleman to look into, half inclined to decide that he would not increase his knowledge about that modern Ezra, who was certainly not a leader among his people – a hesitation which proved how, in a man much given to reasoning, a bare possibility may weigh more than the best-clad likelihood; for Deronda's reasoning had decided that all likelihood was against this man's being Mirah's brother.

One of the shop-windows he paused before was that of a second-hand book-shop, where, on a narrow table outside, the literature of the ages was represented in judicious mixture, from the immortal verse of Homer to the mortal prose of the railway novel. That the mixture was judicious was apparent from Deronda's finding in it something that he wanted – namely, that wonderful bit of autobiography, the life of the Polish Jew, Salomon Maimon; which, as he could easily slip it into his pocket, he took from its place, and entered the shop to pay for, expecting to see behind the counter a grimy personage showing that *nonchalance* about sales which seems to belong universally to the second-hand book-business. In most other trades you find generous men who are anxious to sell you their wares for your own welfare; but even a Jew will not urge Simson's Euclid on you with an affectionate assurance that you will have pleasure in reading it, and that he wishes he had twenty more of the article, so much is it in request. One is led to fear that a second-hand bookseller may belong to that unhappy class of men who have no belief in the good of what they get their living by, yet keep conscience enough to be morose rather than unctuous in their vocation.

But instead of the ordinary tradesman, he saw, on the dark background of books in the long narrow shop, a figure that was somewhat startling in its unusualness. A man in threadbare clothing, whose age was difficult to guess – from the dead yellowish flatness of the flesh, something like an old ivory carving – was seated on a stool against some book-shelves that projected beyond the short counter, doing nothing more remarkable than reading the yesterday's *Times*; but when he let the paper rest on his lap and looked at the incoming customer, the thought glanced through Deronda that precisely such a physiognomy as that might possibly have been seen in a prophet of the Exile, or in some New Hebrew poet of the mediaeval time. It was a finely typical Jewish face, wrought into intensity of expression apparently by a strenuous eager experience in which all the satisfaction had been indirect and far off, and perhaps by some bodily suffering also, which involved that absence of ease in the present. The features were clear-cut, not large; the brow not high but broad, and fully defined by the crisp black hair. It might never have been a particularly handsome face, but it must always have been forcible; and now with its dark, far-off gaze, and yellow pallor in relief on the gloom of the backward shop, one might have imagined one's self coming upon it in some past prison of the Inquisition, which a mob had suddenly burst open; while the look fixed on an incidental customer seemed eager and questioning enough to have been turned on one who might have been a messenger either of delivery or of death. The figure was probably familiar and unexciting enough to the inhabitants of this street; but to Deronda's mind it brought so strange a blending of the unwonted with the common, that there was a perceptible interval of mutual observation before he asked his question: 'What is the price of this book?'

After taking the book and examining the fly-leaves without rising, the supposed bookseller said, 'There is no mark, and Mr Ram is not in now. I am keeping the shop while he is gone to dinner. What are you disposed to give for it?' He held the book closed on his lap with his hand on it and looked examiningly at Deronda, over whom there came the disagreeable idea, that possibly this striking personage wanted to see how much could be got out of a customer's ignorance of prices. But without further reflection he said, 'Don't you know how much it is worth?'

'Not its market-price. May I ask, have you read it?'

'No. I have read an account of it, which makes me want to buy it.'

'You are a man of learning – you are interested in Jewish history?' This was said in a deepened tone of eager inquiry.

‘I am certainly interested in Jewish history,’ said Deronda, quietly, curiosity overcoming his dislike to the sort of inspection as well as questioning he was under.

But immediately the strange Jew rose from his sitting posture, and Deronda felt a thin hand pressing his arm tightly, while a hoarse, excited voice, not much above a loud whisper, said –

‘You are perhaps of our race?’

Deronda coloured deeply, not liking the grasp, and then answered with a slight shake of the head, ‘No.’ The grasp was relaxed, the hand withdrawn, the eagerness of the face collapsed into uninterested melancholy, as if some possessing spirit which had leaped into the eyes and gestures had sunk back again to the inmost recesses of the frame; and moving further off as he held out the little book, the stranger said in a tone of distant civility, ‘I believe Mr Ram will be satisfied with half-a-crown, sir.’

The effect of this change on Deronda – he afterwards smiled when he recalled it – was oddly embarrassing and humiliating, as if some high dignitary had found him deficient and given him his *congé*. There was nothing further to be said, however: he paid his half-crown and carried off his *Salomon Maimon’s Lebensgeschichte* with a mere ‘good morning.’

He felt some vexation at the sudden arrest of the interview, and the apparent prohibition that he should know more of this man, who was certainly something out of the common way – as different probably as a Jew could well be from Ezra Cohen, through whose door Deronda was presently entering, and whose flourishing face glistening on the way to fatness was hanging over the counter in negotiation with some one on the other side of the partition, concerning two plated stoppers and three teaspoons, which lay spread before him. Seeing Deronda enter, he called out ‘Mother! Mother!’ and then with a familiar nod and smile, said, ‘Coming, sir – coming directly.’

Deronda could not help looking towards the door from the back with some anxiety, which was not soothed when he saw a vigorous woman beyond fifty enter and approach to serve him. Not that there was anything very repulsive about her: the worst that could be said was that she had that look of having made her toilet with little water, and by twilight, which is common to unyouthful people of her class, and of having presumably slept in her large earrings, if not in her rings and necklace. In fact, what caused a sinking of heart in Deronda was, her not being so coarse and ugly as to exclude the idea of her being Mirah’s mother. Any one who has looked at a face to try and discern signs of known kinship in it will understand his process of conjecture – how he tried to think away the fat which had gradually disguised the outlines of youth, and to discern what one may call the elementary expressions of the face. He was sorry to see no absolute negative to his fears. Just as it was conceivable that this Ezra, brought up to trade, might resemble the scapegrace father in everything but his knowledge and talent, so it was not impossible that this mother might have had a lovely refined daughter whose type of feature and expression was like Mirah’s. The eyebrows had a vexatious similarity of line; and who shall decide how far a face may be masked when the uncherishing years have thrust it far onward in the ever-new procession of youth and age? The good-humour of the glance remained and shone out in a motherly way at Deronda, as she said, in a mild guttural tone –

‘How can I serve you, sir?’

‘I should like to look at the silver clasps in the window,’ said Deronda; ‘the larger ones, please, in the corner there.’

They were not quite easy to get at from the mother’s station, and the son seeing this called out, ‘I’ll reach ’em, mother; I’ll reach ’em,’ running forward with alacrity, and then handing the clasps to Deronda with the smiling remark –

‘Mother’s too proud: she wants to do everything herself. That’s why I called her to wait on you, sir. When there’s a particular gentleman customer, sir, I daren’t do any other than call her. But I can’t let her do herself a mischief with stretching.’

Here Mr Cohen made way again for his parent, who gave a little guttural amiable laugh while she looked at Deronda, as much as to say, ‘This boy will be at his jokes, but you see he’s the best son in the world;’ and evidently the son enjoyed pleasing her, though he also wished to convey an apology to his distinguished customer for not giving him the advantage of his own exclusive attention.

Deronda began to examine the clasps as if he had many points to observe before he could come to a decision.

‘They are only three guineas, sir,’ said the mother, encouragingly.

‘First-rate workmanship, sir – worth twice the money; only I got ’em a bargain from Cologne,’ said the son, parenthetically, from a distance.

Meanwhile two new customers entered, and the repeated call, ‘Addy!’ brought from the back of the shop a group that Deronda turned frankly to stare at, feeling sure that the stare would be held complimentary. The group consisted of a black-eyed young woman who carried a black-eyed little one, its head already well covered with black curls, and deposited it on the counter, from which station it looked round with even more

than the usual intelligence of babies; also a robust boy of six and a younger girl, both with black eyes and black-ringed hair – looking more Semitic than their parents, as the puppy lions show the spots of far-off progenitors. The young woman answering to 'Addy' – a sort of paroquet in a bright blue dress, with coral necklace and earrings, her hair set up in a huge bush – looked as complacently lively and unrefined as her husband; and by a certain difference from the mother deepened in Deronda the unwelcome impression that the latter was not so utterly common a Jewess as to exclude her being the mother of Mirah. While that thought was glancing through his mind, the boy had run forward into the shop with an energetic stamp, and setting himself about four feet from Deronda, with his hands in the pockets of his miniature knickerbockers, looked at him with a precocious air of survey. Perhaps it was chiefly with a diplomatic design to linger and ingratiate himself that Deronda patted the boy's head, saying –

'What is your name, sirrah?'

'Jacob Alexander Cohen,' said the small man, with much ease and distinctness.

'You are not named after your father, then?'

'No; after my grandfather. He sells knives and razors and scissors – my grandfather does,' said Jacob, wishing to impress the stranger with that high connection. 'He gave me this knife.' Here a pocketknife was drawn forth, and the small fingers, both naturally and artificially dark, opened two blades and a cork-screw with much quickness.

'Is not that a dangerous plaything?' said Deronda, turning to the grandmother.

'*He*'ll never hurt himself, bless you!' said she, contemplating her grandson with placid rapture.

'Have *you* got a knife?' says Jacob, coming closer. His small voice was hoarse in its glibness, as if it belonged to an aged commercial soul, fatigued with bargaining through many generations.

'Yes. Do you want to see it?' said Deronda, taking a small penknife from his waistcoat-pocket.

Jacob seized it immediately and retreated a little, holding the two knives in his palms and bending over them in meditative comparison. By this time the other clients were gone, and the whole family had gathered to the spot, centring their attention on the marvellous Jacob: the father, mother, and grandmother behind the counter, with baby held staggering theron, and the little girl in front leaning at her brother's elbow to assist him in looking at the knives.

'Mine's the best,' said Jacob, at last, returning Deronda's knife as if he had been entertaining the idea of exchange and had rejected it.

Father and mother laughed aloud with delight. 'You won't find Jacob choosing the worst,' said Mr Cohen, winking, with much confidence in the customer's admiration. Deronda, looking at the grandmother, who had only an inward silent laugh, said –

'Are these the only grandchildren you have?'

'All. This is my only son,' she answered, in a communicative tone, Deronda's glance and manner as usual conveying the impression of sympathetic interest – which on this occasion answered his purpose well. It seemed to come naturally enough that he should say –

'And you have no daughter?'

There was an instantaneous change in the mother's face. Her lips closed more firmly, she looked down, swept her hands outward on the counter, and finally turned her back on Deronda to examine some Indian handkerchiefs that hung in pawn behind her. Her son gave a significant glance, set up his shoulders an instant and just put his finger to his lips, – then said quickly, 'I think you're a first-rate gentleman in the city, sir, if I may be allowed to guess.'

'No,' said Deronda, with a preoccupied air, 'I have nothing to do with the city.'

'That's a bad job. I thought you might be the young principal of a first-rate firm,' said Mr Cohen, wishing to make amends for the check on his customer's natural desire to know more of him and his. 'But you understand silver-work, I see.'

'A little,' said Deronda, taking up the clasps a moment and laying them down again. That unwelcome bit of circumstantial evidence had made his mind busy with a plan which was certainly more like acting than anything he had been aware of in his own conduct before. But the bare possibility that more knowledge might nullify the evidence, now overpowered the inclination to rest in uncertainty.

'To tell you the truth,' he went on, 'my errand is not so much to buy as to borrow. I daresay you go into rather heavy transactions occasionally.'

'Well, sir, I've accommodated gentlemen of distinction – I'm proud to say it. I wouldn't exchange my business with any in the world. There's none more honourable, nor more charitable, nor more necessary for all classes, from the good lady who wants a little of the ready for the baker, to a gentleman like yourself, sir, who may want it for amusement. I like my business, I like my street, and I like my shop. I wouldn't have it a door further down. And I wouldn't be without a pawn-shop, sir, to be the Lord Mayor. It puts you in connection with the world at large. I say it's like the Government revenue – it embraces the brass as well as

the gold of the country. And a man who doesn't get money, sir, can't accommodate. Now what can I do for *you*, sir?'

If an amiable self-satisfaction is the mark of earthly bliss, Solomon in all his glory was a pitiable mortal compared with Mr Cohen – clearly one of those persons who, being in excellent spirits about themselves, are willing to cheer strangers by letting them know it. While he was delivering himself with lively rapidity, he took the baby from his wife and holding it on his arm presented his features to be explored by its small fists. Deronda, not in a cheerful mood, was rashly pronouncing this Ezra Cohen to be the most unpoetic Jew he had ever met with in books or life: his phraseology was as little as possible like that of the Old Testament; and no shadow of a Suffering Race distinguished his vulgarity of soul from that of a prosperous pink-and-white huckster of the purest English lineage. It is naturally a Christian feeling that a Jew ought not to be conceited. However, this was no reason for not persevering in his project, and he answered at once in adventurous ignorance of technicalities –

'I have a fine diamond ring to offer as security – not with me at this moment, unfortunately, for I am not in the habit of wearing it. But I will come again this evening and bring it with me. Fifty pounds at once would be a convenience to me.'

'Well, you know, this evening is the Sabbath, young gentleman,' said Cohen, 'and I go to the *Shool*. The shop will be closed. But accommodation is a work of charity; if you can't get here before, and are any ways pressed – why, I'll look at your diamond. You're perhaps from the West End – a longish drive?'

'Yes; and your Sabbath begins early at this season. I could be here by five – will that do?' Deronda had not been without hope that by asking to come on a Friday evening he might get a better opportunity of observing points in the family character, and might even be able to put some decisive question.

Cohen assented; but here the marvellous Jacob, whose *physique* supported a precocity that would have shattered a Gentile of his years, showed that he had been listening with much comprehension by saying, 'You are coming again. Have you got any more knives at home?'

'I think I have one,' said Deronda, smiling down at him.

'Has it two blades and a hook – and a white handle like that?' said Jacob, pointing to the waistcoat-pocket.

'I daresay it has.'

'Do you like a cork-screw?' said Jacob, exhibiting that article in his own knife again, and looking up with serious inquiry.

'Yes,' said Deronda, experimentally.

'Bring your knife, then, and we'll shwop,' said Jacob, returning the knife to his pocket, and stamping about with the sense that he had concluded a good transaction.

The grandmother had now recovered her usual manners, and the whole family watched Deronda radiantly when he caressingly lifted the little girl, to whom he had not hitherto given attention, and seating her on the counter, asked for her name also. She looked at him in silence, and put her fingers to her gold earrings, which he did not seem to have noticed.

'Adelaide Rebekah is her name,' said her mother, proudly. 'Speak to the gentleman, lovey.'

'Shlav'm Shabbes fyock on,' said Adelaide Rebekah.

'Her Sabbath frock, she means,' said the father, in explanation. 'She'll have her Sabbath frock on this evening.'

'And will you let me see you in it, Adelaide?' said Deronda, with that gentle intonation which came very easily to him.

'Say yes, lovey – yes, if you please, sir,' said her mother, enchanted with this handsome young gentleman, who appreciated remarkable children.

'And will you give me a kiss this evening?' said Deronda, with a hand on each of her little brown shoulders.

Adelaide Rebekah (her miniature crinoline and monumental features corresponded with the combination of her names) immediately put up her lips to pay the kiss in advance; whereupon her father, rising into still more glowing satisfaction with the general meritoriousness of his circumstances, and with the stranger who was an admiring witness, said cordially –

'You see there's somebody will be disappointed if you don't come this evening, sir. You won't mind sitting down in our family place and waiting a bit for me, if I'm not in when you come, sir? I'll stretch a point to accommodate a gent of your sort. Bring the diamond, and I'll see what I can do for you.'

Deronda thus left the most favourable impression behind him, as a preparation for more easy intercourse. But for his own part those amenities had been carried on under the heaviest spirits. If these were really Mirah's relatives, he could not imagine that even her fervid filial piety could give the reunion with them any sweetness beyond such as could be found in the strict fulfilment of a painful duty. What did this vaunting brother need? And with the most favourable supposition about the hypothetic mother, Deronda shrank from the image of a first meeting between her and Mirah, and still more from the idea of Mirah's domestication

with this family. He took refuge in disbelief. To find an Ezra Cohen when the name was running in your head was no more extraordinary than to find a Josiah Smith under like circumstances; and as to the coincidence about the daughter, it would probably turn out to be a difference. If, however, further knowledge confirmed the more undesirable conclusion, what would be wise expediency? – to try and determine the best consequences by concealment, or to brave other consequences for the sake of that openness which is the sweet fresh air of our moral life.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Er ist geheissen
Israel. Ihn hat verwandelt
Hexenspruch in einen Hund.

Aber jeden Freitag Abend,
In der Dämmrungstunde, plötzlich
Weicht der Zauber, und der Hund
Wird aufs Neu' ein menschlich Wesen.

– HEINE: *Prinzessin Sabbath*[12]

When Deronda arrived at five o'clock, the shop was closed and the door was opened for him by the Christian servant. When she showed him into the room behind the shop he was surprised at the prettiness of the scene. The house was old, and rather extensive at the back: probably the large room he now entered was gloomy by daylight, but now it was agreeably lit by a fine old brass lamp with seven oil-lights hanging above the snow-white cloth spread on the central table. The ceiling and walls were smoky, and all the surroundings were dark enough to throw into relief the human figures, which had a Venetian glow of colouring. The grandmother was arrayed in yellowish brown with a large gold chain in lieu of the necklace, and by this light her yellow face with its darkly-marked eyebrows and framing roll of grey hair looked as handsome as was necessary for picturesque effect. Young Mrs Cohen was clad in red and black, with a string of large artificial pearls wound round and round her neck: the baby lay asleep in the cradle under a scarlet counterpane; Adelaide Rebekah was in braided amber; and Jacob Alexander was in black velveteen with scarlet stockings. As the four pairs of black eyes all glistened a welcome at Deronda, he was almost ashamed of the supercilious dislike these happy-looking creatures had raised in him by daylight. Nothing could be more cordial than the greeting he received, and both mother and grandmother seemed to gather more dignity from being seen on the private hearth, showing hospitality. He looked round with some wonder at the old furniture: the oaken bureau and high side table must surely be mere matters of chance and economy, and not due to the family taste. A large dish of blue-and-yellow ware was set up on the side table, and flanking it were two old silver vessels; in front of them a large volume in darkened vellum with a deep-ribbed back. In the corner at the farther end was an open door into an inner room, where there was also a light.

Deronda took in these details by parenthetic glances while he met Jacob's pressing solicitude about the knife. He had taken the pains to buy one with the requisites of the hook and white handle, and produced it on demand, saying –

'Is that the sort of thing you want, Jacob?'

It was subjected to a severe scrutiny, the hook and blades were opened, and the article of barter with the cork-screw was drawn forth for comparison.

'Why do you like a hook better than a cork-screw?' said Deronda.

''Caush I can get hold of things with a hook. A cork-screw won't go into anything but corks. But it's better for you, you can draw corks.'

'You agree to change, then?' said Deronda, observing that the grandmother was listening with delight.

'What else have you got in your pockets?' said Jacob, with deliberative seriousness.

'Hush, hush, Jacob, love,' said the grandmother. And Deronda, mindful of discipline, answered –

'I think I must not tell you that. Our business was with the knives.'

Jacob looked up into his face scanningly for a moment or two, and apparently arriving at his conclusions, said gravely –

'I'll shwop,' handing the cork-screw knife to Deronda, who pocketed it with corresponding gravity.

Immediately the small son of Shem ran off into the next room, whence his voice was heard in rapid chat; and then ran back again – when, seeing his father enter, he seized a little velveteen hat which lay on a chair and put it on to approach him. Cohen kept on his own hat, and took no notice of the visitor, but stood still while the two children went up to him and clasped his knees: then he laid his hands on each in turn and uttered his Hebrew benediction; whereupon the wife who had lately taken baby from the cradle brought it up

to her husband and held it under his outstretched hands, to be blessed in its sleep. For the moment Deronda thought that this pawnbroker proud of his vocation was not utterly prosaic.

'Well, sir, you found your welcome in my family, I think,' said Cohen, putting down his hat and becoming his former self. 'And you've been punctual. Nothing like a little stress here,' he added, tapping his side pocket as he sat down. 'It's good for us all in our turn. I've felt it when I've had to make up payments. I began early – had to turn myself about and put myself into shapes to fit every sort of box. It's bracing to the mind. Now then! let us see, let us see.'

'That is the ring I spoke of,' said Deronda, taking it from his finger. 'I believe it cost a hundred pounds. It will be a sufficient pledge to you for fifty, I think. I shall probably redeem it in a month or so.'

Cohen's glistening eyes seemed to get a little nearer together as he met the ingenous look of this crude young gentleman, who apparently supposed that redemption was a satisfaction to pawnbrokers. He took the ring, examined and returned it, saying with indifference, 'Good, good. We'll talk of it after our meal. Perhaps you'll join us, if you've no objection. Me and my wife'll feel honoured, and so will mother; won't you, mother?'

The invitation was doubly echoed, and Deronda gladly accepted it. All now turned and stood round the table. No dish was at present seen except one covered with a napkin; and Mrs Cohen had placed a china bowl near her husband that he might wash his hands in it. But after putting on his hat again, he paused, and called in a loud voice, 'Mordecai!'

Can this be part of the religious ceremony? thought Deronda, not knowing what might be expected of the ancient hero. But he heard a 'Yes' from the next room, which made him look towards the open door; and there, to his astonishment, he saw the figure of the enigmatic Jew whom he had this morning met with in the bookshop. Their eyes met, and Mordecai looked as much surprised as Deronda – neither in his surprise making any sign of recognition. But when Mordecai was seating himself at the end of the table, he just bent his head to the guest in a cold and distant manner, as if the disappointment of the morning remained a disagreeable association with this new acquaintance.

Cohen now washed his hands, pronouncing Hebrew words the while: afterwards, he took off the napkin covering the dish and disclosed the two long flat loaves besprinkled with seed – the memorial of the manna that fed the wandering forefathers – and breaking off small pieces gave one to each of the family, including Adelaide Rebekah, who stood on the chair with her whole length exhibited in her amber-coloured garment, her little Jewish nose lengthened by compression of the lip in the effort to make a suitable appearance. Cohen then uttered another Hebrew blessing, and after that, the male heads were uncovered, all seated themselves, and the meal went on without any peculiarity that interested Deronda. He was not very conscious of what dishes he ate from, being preoccupied with a desire to turn the conversation in a way that would enable him to ask some leading question; and also with thinking of Mordecai, between whom and himself there was an exchange of fascinated, half-furtive glances. Mordecai had no handsome Sabbath garment, but instead of the threadbare rusty black coat of the morning he wore one of light drab, which looked as if it had once been a handsome loose paletot now shrunk with washing; and this change of clothing gave a still stronger accentuation to his dark-haired, eager face, which might have belonged to the prophet Ezekiel – also probably not modish in the eyes of contemporaries. It was noticeable that the thin tails of the fried fish were given to Mordecai; and in general the sort of share assigned to a poor relation – no doubt a 'survival' of prehistoric practice, not yet generally admitted to be superstitious.

Mr Cohen kept up the conversation with much liveliness, introducing as subjects always in taste (the Jew is proud of his loyalty) the Queen and the Royal Family, the Emperor and Empress of the French – into which both grandmother and wife entered with zest. Mrs Cohen the younger showed an accurate memory of distinguished birthdays; and the elder assisted her son in informing the guest of what occurred when the Emperor and Empress were in England and visited the city, ten years before.

'I daresay you know all about it better than we do, sir,' said Cohen, repeatedly, by way of preface to full information; and the interesting statements were kept up in a trio.

'Our baby is named *Eu*genie Esther,' said young Mrs Cohen, vivaciously.

'It's wonderful how the Emperor's like a cousin of mine in the face,' said the grandmother; 'it struck me like lightning when I caught sight of him. I couldn't have thought it.'

'Mother and me went to see the Emperor and Empress at the Crystal Palace,' said Mr Cohen. 'I had a fine piece of work to take care of mother; she might have been squeezed flat – though she was pretty near as lusty then as she is now. I said, if I had a hundred mothers I'd never take one of 'em to see the Emperor and Empress at the Crystal Palace again; and you may think a man can't afford it when he's got but one mother – not if he'd ever so big an insurance on her.' He stroked his mother's shoulder affectionately, and chuckled a little at his own humour.

'Your mother has been a widow a long while, perhaps,' said Deronda, seizing his opportunity. 'That has

made your care for her the more needful.'

'Ay, ay, it's a good many *yore-zeit* since I had to manage for her and myself,' said Cohen, quickly. 'I went early to it. It's that makes you a sharp knife.'

'What does – what makes a sharp knife, father?' said Jacob, his cheek very much swollen with sweet-cake.

The father winked at his guest and said, 'Having your nose put on the grindstone.'

Jacob slipped from his chair with the piece of sweet-cake in his hand, and going close up to Mordecai, who had been totally silent hitherto, said, 'What does that mean – putting my nose to the grindstone?'

'It means that you are to bear being hurt without making a noise,' said Mordecai, turning his eyes benignantly on the small face close to his. Jacob put the corner of the cake into Mordecai's mouth as an invitation to bite, saying meanwhile, 'I shan't, though,' and keeping his eyes on the cake to observe how much of it went in this act of generosity. Mordecai took a bite and smiled, evidently meaning to please the lad, and the little incident made them both look more lovable. Deronda, however, felt with some vexation that he had taken little by his question.

'I fancy that is the right quarter for learning,' said he, carrying on the subject that he might have an excuse for addressing Mordecai, to whom he turned and said, 'You have been a great student, I imagine.'

'I have studied,' was the quiet answer. 'And you? – You know German, by the book you were buying.'

'Yes, I have studied in Germany. Are you generally engaged in bookselling?' said Deronda.

'No; I only go to Mr Ram's shop every day to keep it while he goes to meals,' said Mordecai, who was now looking at Deronda with what seemed a revival of his original interest: it seemed as if the face had some attractive indication for him which now neutralised the former disappointment. After a slight pause, he said, 'Perhaps you know Hebrew?'

'I am sorry to say, not at all.'

Mordecai's countenance fell: he cast down his eyelids, looking at his hands, which lay crossed before him, and said no more. Deronda had now noticed more decisively than in their former interview a difficulty of breathing, which he thought must be a sign of consumption.

'I've had something else to do than to get book-learning,' said Mr Cohen, – 'I've had to make myself knowing about useful things. I know stones well,' – here he pointed to Deronda's ring. 'I'm not afraid of taking that ring of yours at my own valuation. But now,' he added, with a certain drop in his voice to a lower, more familiar nasal, 'what do you want for it?'

'Fifty or sixty pounds,' Deronda answered, rather too carelessly.

Cohen paused a little, thrust his hands into his pockets, fixed on Deronda a pair of glistening eyes that suggested a miraculous guinea-pig, and said, 'Couldn't do you that. Happy to oblige, but couldn't go that lengths. Forty pound – say forty – I'll let you have forty on it.'

Deronda was aware that Mordecai had looked up again at the words implying a monetary affair, and was now examining him again, while he said, 'Very well; I shall redeem it in a month or so.'

'Good. I'll make you out the ticket by-and-by,' said Cohen, indifferently. Then he held up his finger as a sign that conversation must be deferred. He, Mordecai, and Jacob put on their hats, and Cohen opened a thanksgiving, which was carried on by responses, till Mordecai delivered himself alone at some length, in a solemn chanting tone, with his chin slightly uplifted and his thin hands clasped easily before him. Not only in his accent and tone, but in his freedom from the self-consciousness which has reference to others' approbation, there could hardly have been a stronger contrast to the Jew at the other end of the table. It was an unaccountable conjunction – the presence among these common, prosperous, shopkeeping types, of a man who, in an emaciated threadbare condition, imposed a certain awe on Deronda, and an embarrassment at not meeting his expectations.

No sooner had Mordecai finished his devotional strain, than rising, with a slight bend of his head to the stranger, he walked back into his room, and shut the door behind him.

'That seems to be rather a remarkable man,' said Deronda, turning to Cohen, who immediately set up his shoulders, put out his tongue slightly, and tapped his own brow. It was clearly to be understood that Mordecai did not come up to the standard of sanity which was set by Mr Cohen's view of men and things.

'Does he belong to your family?' said Deronda.

This idea appeared to be rather ludicrous to the ladies as well as to Cohen, and the family interchanged looks of amusement.

'No, no,' said Cohen. 'Charity! charity! He worked for me, and when he got weaker and weaker I took him in. He's an encumbrance; but he brings a blessing down, and he teaches the boy. Besides, he does the repairing at the watches and jewellery.'

Deronda hardly abstained from smiling at this mixture of kindliness and the desire to justify it in the light of a calculation; but his willingness to speak further of Mordecai, whose character was made the more enigmatically striking by these new details, was baffled. Mr Cohen immediately dismissed the subject by

reverting to the ‘accommodation,’ which was also an act of charity, and proceeded to make out the ticket, get the forty pounds, and present them both in exchange for the diamond ring. Deronda, feeling that it would be hardly delicate to protract his visit beyond the settlement of the business which was its pretext, had to take his leave, with no more decided result than the advance of forty pounds and the pawn-ticket in his breast-pocket, to make a reason for returning when he came up to town after Christmas. He was resolved that he would then endeavour to gain a little more insight into the character and history of Mordecai; from whom also he might gather something decisive about the Cohens – for example, the reason why it was forbidden to ask Mrs Cohen the elder whether she had a daughter.

BOOK FIVE

Mordecai

Chapter Thirty-Five

> Were uneasiness of conscience measured by extent of crime, human history had been different, and one should look to see the contrivers of greedy wars and the mighty marauders of the money-market in one troop of self-lacerating penitents with the meaner robber and cut-purse and the murderer that doth his butchery in small with his own hand. No doubt wickedness hath its rewards to distribute; but whoso wins in this devil's game must needs be baser, more cruel, more brutal than the order of this planet will allow for the multitude born of woman, the most of these carrying a form conscience – a fear which is the shadow of justice, a pity which is the shadow of love – that hindereth from the prize of serene wickedness, itself difficult of maintenance in our composite flesh.

On the 29th of December Deronda knew that the Grandcourts had arrived at the Abbey, but he had had no glimpse of them before he went to dress for dinner. There had been a splendid fall of snow, allowing the party of children the rare pleasures of snow-balling and snow-building, and in the Christmas holidays the Mallinger girls were content with no amusement unless it were joined in and managed by 'cousin,' as they had always called Deronda. After that outdoor exertion he had been playing billiards, and thus the hours had passed without his dwelling at all on the prospect of meeting Gwendolen at dinner. Nevertheless that prospect was interesting to him; and when, a little tired and heated with working at amusement, he went to his room before the half-hour bell had rung, he began to think of it with some speculation on the sort of influence her marriage with Grandcourt would have on her, and on the probability that there would be some discernible shades of change in her manner since he saw her at Diplow, just as there had been since his first vision of her at Leubronn.

'I fancy there are some natures one could see growing or degenerating every day, if one watched them,' was his thought. 'I suppose some of us go on faster than others; and I am sure she is a creature who keeps strong traces of anything that has once impressed her. That little affair of the necklace, and the idea that somebody thought her gambling wrong, had evidently bitten into her. But such impressibility tells both ways: it may drive one to desperation as soon as to anything better. And whatever fascinations Grandcourt may have for capricious tastes – good heavens! who can believe that he would call out the tender affections in daily companionship? One might be tempted to horsewhip him for the sake of getting some show of passion into his face and speech. I'm afraid she married him out of ambition – to escape poverty. But why did she run out of his way at first? The poverty came after, though. Poor thing! she may have been urged into it. How can one feel anything else than pity for a young creature like that – full of unused life – ignorantly rash – hanging all her blind expectations on that remnant of a human being!'

Doubtless the phrases which Deronda's meditation applied to the bridegroom were the less complimentary for the excuses and pity in which it clad the bride. His notion of Grandcourt as a 'remnant' was founded on no particular knowledge, but simply on the impression which ordinary polite intercourse had given him that Grandcourt had worn out all his natural healthy interest in things.

In general, one may be sure that whenever a marriage of any mark takes place, male acquaintances are likely to pity the bride, female acquaintances the bridegroom: each, it is thought, might have done better; and especially where the bride is charming, young gentlemen on the scene are apt to conclude that she can have no real attachment to a fellow so uninteresting to themselves as her husband, but has married him on other grounds. Who under such circumstances pities the husband? Even his female friends are apt to think his position retributive: he should have chosen some one else. But perhaps Deronda may be excused that he did not prepare any pity for Grandcourt, who had never struck acquaintances as likely to come out of his experiences with more suffering than he inflicted; whereas for Gwendolen, young, headlong, eager for pleasure, fed with the flattery which makes a lovely girl believe in her divine right to rule – how quickly might life turn from expectancy to a bitter sense of the irremediable! After what he had seen of her he must have had rather dull feelings not to have looked forward with some interest to her entrance into the room. Still, since the honeymoon was already three weeks in the distance, and Gwendolen had been enthroned not only at Ryelands but at Diplow, she was likely to have composed her countenance with suitable manifestation or concealment, not being one who would indulge the curious by a helpless exposure of her feelings.

A various party had been invited to meet the new couple: the old aristocracy was represented by Lord and Lady Pentreath; the old gentry by young Mr and Mrs Fitzadam of the Worcestershire branch of the Fitzadams; politics and the public good, as specialised in the cider interest, by Mr Fenn, member for West Orchards,

accompained by his two daughters; Lady Mallinger's family, by her brother, Mr Raymond, and his wife; the useful bachelor element by Mr Sinker, the eminent counsel, and by Mr Vandernoodt, whose acquaintance Sir Hugo had found pleasant enough at Leubronn to be adopted in England.

All had assembled in the drawing-room before the new couple appeared. Meanwhile the time was being passed chiefly in noticing the children – various little Raymonds, nephews and nieces of Lady Mallinger's, with her own three girls, who were always allowed to appear at this hour. The scene was really delightful – enlarged by full-length portraits with deep backgrounds, inserted in the cedar panelling – surmounted by a ceiling that glowed with the rich colours of the coats of arms ranged between the sockets – illuminated almost as much by the red fire of oak-boughs as by the pale waxlights – stilled by the deep-piled carpet and by the high English breeding that subdues all voices; while the mixture of ages, from the white-haired Lord and Lady Pentreath to the four-year-old Edgar Raymond, gave a varied charm to the living groups. Lady Mallinger, with fair matronly roundness and mildly prominent blue eyes, moved about in her black velvet, carrying a tiny white dog on her arm as a sort of finish to her costume; the children were scattered among the ladies, while most of the gentlemen were standing rather aloof conversing with that very moderate vivacity observable during the long minutes before dinner. Deronda was a little out of the circle in a dialogue fixed upon him by Mr Vandernoodt, a man of the best Dutch blood imported at the revolution: for the rest, one of those commodious persons in society who are nothing particular themselves, but are understood to be acquainted with the best in every department; close-clipped, pale-eyed, *nonchalant*, as good a foil as could well be found to the intense colouring and vivid gravity of Deronda.

He was talking of the bride and bridegroom, whose appearance was being waited for. Mr Vandernoodt was an industrious gleaner of personal details, and could probably tell everything about a great philosopher or physicist except his theories or discoveries: he was now implying that he had learned many facts about Grandcourt since meeting him at Leubronn.

'Men who have seen a good deal of life don't always end by choosing their wives so well. He has had rather an anecdotic history – gone rather deep into pleasures, I fancy, lazy as he is. But, of course, you know all about him.'

'No, really,' said Deronda, in an indifferent tone. 'I know little more of him than that he is Sir Hugo's nephew.'

But now the door opened and deferred any satisfaction of Mr Vandernoodt's communicativeness.

The scene was one to set off any figure of distinction that entered on it, and certainly when Mr and Mrs Grandcourt entered, no beholder could deny that their figures had distinction. The bridegroom had neither more nor less easy perfection of costume, neither more nor less well-cut impassibility of face, than before his marriage. It was to be supposed of him that he would put up with nothing less than the best in outward equipment, wife included; and the bride was what he might have been expected to choose. 'By George, I think she's handsomer, if anything!' said Mr Vandernoodt. And Deronda was of the same opinion, but he said nothing. The white silk and diamonds – it may seem strange, but she did wear the diamonds on her neck, in her ears, in her hair – might have something to do with the new imposingness of her beauty, which flashed on him as more unquestionable if not more thoroughly satisfactory than when he had first seen her at the gaming-table. Some faces which are peculiar in their beauty are like original works of art: for the first time they are almost always met with question. But in seeing Gwendolen at Diplow, Deronda had discerned in her more than he had expected of that tender appealing charm which we call womanly. Was there any new change since then? He distrusted his impressions; but as he saw her receiving greetings with what seemed a proud cold quietude and a superficial smile, there seemed to be at work within her the same demonic force that had possessed her when she took him in her resolute glance and turned away a loser from the gaming-table. There was no time for more of a conclusion – no time even for him to give his greeting before the summons to dinner.

He sat not far from opposite to her at table, and could sometimes hear what she said in answer to Sir Hugo, who was at his liveliest in conversation with her; but though he looked towards her with the intention of bowing, she gave him no opportunity of doing so for some time. At last Sir Hugo, who might have imagined that they had already spoken to each other, said, 'Deronda, you will like to hear what Mrs Grandcourt tells me about your favourite Klesmer.'

Gwendolen's eyelids had been lowered, and Deronda, already looking at her, thought he discovered a quivering reluctance as she was obliged to raise them and return his unembarrassed bow and smile, her own smile being one of the lip merely. It was but an instant, and Sir Hugo continued without pause –

'The Arrowpoints have condoned the marriage, and he is spending the Christmas with his bride at Quetcham.'

'I suppose he will be glad of it for the sake of his wife, else I daresay he would not have minded keeping at a distance,' said Deronda.

‘It’s a sort of troubadour story,’ said Lady Pentreath, an easy, deep-voiced old lady; ‘I’m glad to find a little romance left among us. I think our young people now are getting too worldly wise.’

‘It shows the Arrowpoints’ good sense, however, to have adopted the affair, after the fuss in the papers,’ said Sir Hugo. ‘And disowning your own child because of a *mésalliance* is something like disowning your one eye: everybody knows it’s yours, and you have no other to make an appearance with.’

‘As to *mésalliance*, there’s no blood on any side,’ said Lady Pentreath. ‘Old Admiral Arrowpoint was one of Nelson’s men, you know – a doctor’s son. And we all know how the mother’s money came.’

‘If there were any *mésalliance* in the case, I should say it was on Klesmer’s side,’ said Deronda.

‘Ah, you think it is a case of the immortal marrying the mortal. What is your opinion?’ said Sir Hugo, looking at Gwendolen.

‘I have no doubt that Herr Klesmer thinks himself immortal. But I daresay his wife will burn as much incense before him as he requires,’ said Gwendolen. She had recovered any composure that she might have lost.

‘Don’t you approve of a wife burning incense before her husband?’ said Sir Hugo, with an air of jocoseness.

‘Oh yes,’ said Gwendolen, ‘if it were only to make others believe in him.’ She paused a moment and then said with more gaiety, ‘When Herr Klesmer admires his own genius, it will take off some of the absurdity if his wife says Amen.’

‘Klesmer is no favourite of yours, I see,’ said Sir Hugo.

‘I think very highly of him, I assure you,’ said Gwendolen. ‘His genius is quite above my judgment, and I know him to be exceedingly generous.’

She spoke with the sudden seriousness which is often meant to correct an unfair or indiscreet sally, having a bitterness against Klesmer in her secret soul which she knew herself unable to justify. Deronda was wondering what he should have thought of her if he had never heard of her before: probably that she put on a little hardness and defiance by way of concealing some painful consciousness – if, indeed, he could imagine her manners otherwise than in the light of his suspicion. But why did she not recognise him with more friendliness?

Sir Hugo, by way of changing the subject, said to her, ‘Is not this a beautiful room? It was part of the refectory of the Abbey. There was a division made by those pillars and the three arches, and afterwards they were built up. Else it was half as large again originally. There used to be rows of Benedictines sitting where we are sitting. Suppose we were suddenly to see the lights burning low and the ghost of the old monks rising behind all our chairs!’

‘Please don’t!’ said Gwendolen, with a playful shudder. ‘It is very nice to come after ancestors and monks but they should know their places and keep underground. I should be rather frightened to go about this house all alone. I suppose the old generations must be angry with us because we have altered things so much.’

‘Oh, the ghosts must be of all political parties,’ said Sir Hugo. ‘And those fellows who wanted to change things while they lived and couldn’t do it must be on our side. But if you would not like to go over the house alone, you will like to go in company, I hope. You and Grandcourt ought to see it all. And we will ask Deronda to go round with us. He is more learned about it than I am.’ The baronet was in the most complaisant of humours.

Gwendolen stole a glance at Deronda who must have heard what Sir Hugo said, for he had his face turned towards them helping himself to an *entrée*; but he looked as impassive as a picture. At the notion of Deronda’s showing her and Grandcourt the place which was to be theirs, and which she with painful emphasis remembered might have been his (perhaps if others had acted differently), certain thoughts had rushed in – thoughts often repeated within her, but now returning on an occasion embarrassingly new; and she was conscious of something furtive and awkward in her glance, which Sir Hugo must have noticed. With her usual readiness of resource against betrayal, she said playfully, ‘You don’t know how much I am afraid of Mr Deronda.’

‘How’s that? Because you think him too learned?’ said Sir Hugo, whom the peculiarity of her glance had not escaped.

‘No. It is ever since I first saw him at Leubronn. Because when he came to look on at the roulette-table, I began to lose. He cast an evil eye on my play. He didn’t approve it. He has told me so. And now whatever I do before him, I am afraid he will cast an evil eye upon it.’

‘Gad! I’m rather afraid of him myself when he doesn’t approve,’ said Sir Hugo, glancing at Deronda; and then turning his face towards Gwendolen, he said less audibly, ‘I don’t think ladies generally object to have his eyes upon them.’ The baronet’s small chronic complaint of facetiousness was at this moment almost as annoying to Gwendolen as it often was to Deronda.

‘I object to any eyes that are critical,’ she said, in a cool high voice, with a turn of her neck. ‘Are there many of these old rooms left in the Abbey?’

‘Not many. There is a fine cloistered court with a long gallery above it. But the finest bit of all is turned into stables. It is part of the old church. When I improved the place I made the most of every other bit; but it was out of my reach to change the stables, so the horses have the benefit of the fine old choir. You must go and see it.’

‘I shall like to see the horses as well as the building,’ said Gwendolen.

‘Oh, I have no stud to speak of. Grandcourt will look with contempt at my horses,’ said Sir Hugo. ‘I’ve given up hunting, and go on in a jog-trot way, as becomes an old gentleman with daughters. The fact is, I went in for doing too much at this place. We all lived at Diplow for two years while the alterations were going on. Do you like Diplow?’

‘Not particularly,’ said Gwendolen, with indifference. One would have thought that the young lady had all her life had more family seats than she cared to go to.

‘Ah! it will not do after Ryelands,’ said Sir Hugo, well pleased. ‘Grandcourt, I know, took it for the sake of the hunting. But he found something so much better there,’ added the baronet, lowering his voice, ‘that he might well prefer it to any other place in the world.’

‘It has one attraction for me,’ said Gwendolen, passing over this compliment with a chill smile, ‘that it is within reach of Offendene.’

‘I understand that,’ said Sir Hugo, and then let the subject drop.

What amiable baronet can escape the effect of a strong desire for a particular possession? Sir Hugo would have been glad that Grandcourt, with or without reason, should prefer any other place to Diplow; but inasmuch as in the pure process of wishing we can always make the conditions of our gratification benevolent, he did wish that Grandcourt’s convenient disgust for Diplow should not be associated with his marriage of this very charming bride. Gwendolen was much to the baronet’s taste, but, as he observed afterwards to Lady Mallinger, he should never have taken her for a young girl who had married beyond her expectations.

Deronda had not heard much of this conversation, having given his attention elsewhere, but the glimpses he had of Gwendolen’s manner deepened the impression that it had something newly artificial.

Later in the drawing-room, Deronda, at somebody’s request, sat down to the piano and sang. Afterwards Mrs Raymond took his place; and on rising he observed that Gwendolen had left her seat, and had come to this end of the room, as if to listen more fully, but was now standing with her back to every one, apparently contemplating a fine cowled head carved in ivory which hung over a small table. He longed to go to her and speak. Why should he not obey such an impulse, as he would have done towards any other lady in the room? Yet he hesitated some moments, observing the graceful lines of her back, but not moving.

If you have any reason for not indulging a wish to speak to a fair woman, it is a bad plan to look long at her back: the wish to see what it screens becomes the stronger. There may be a very sweet smile on the other side. Deronda ended by going to the end of the small table, at right angles to Gwendolen’s position, but before he could speak she had turned on him no smile, but such an appealing look of sadness, so utterly different from the chill effort of her recognition at table, that his speech was checked. For what was an appreciable space of time to both, though the observation of others could not have measured it, they looked at each other – she seeming to take the deep rest of confession, he with an answering depth of sympathy that neutralised other feelings.

‘Will you not join in the music?’ he said, by way of meeting the necessity for speech.

That her look of confession had been involuntary was shown by that just perceptible shake and change of countenance with which she roused herself to reply calmly, ‘I join in it by listening. I am fond of music.’

‘Are you not a musician?’

‘I have given a great deal of time to music. But I have not talent enough to make it worth while. I shall never sing again.’

‘But if you are fond of music, it will always be worth while in private, for your own delight. I make it a virtue to be content with my middlingness,’ said Deronda, smiling; ‘it is always pardonable, so that one does not ask others to take it for superiority.’

‘I cannot imitate you,’ said Gwendolen, recovering her tone of artificial vivacity. ‘To be middling with me is another phrase for being dull. And the worst fault I have to find with the world is, that it is dull. Do you know, I am going to justify gambling in spite of you. It is a refuge from dulness.’

‘I don’t admit the justification,’ said Deronda. ‘I think what we call the dulness of things is a disease in ourselves. Else how could any one find an intense interest in life? And many do.’

‘Ah, I see! The fault I find in the world is my own fault,’ said Gwendolen, smiling at him. Then after a moment, looking up at the ivory again, she said, ‘Do *you* never find fault with the world or with others?’

‘Oh yes. When I am in a grumbling mood.’

‘And hate people? Confess you hate them when they stand in your way – when their gain is your loss? That is your own phrase, you know.’

‘We are often standing in each other’s way when we can’t help it. I think it is stupid to hate people on that ground.’

‘But if they injure you and could have helped it?’ said Gwendolen, with a hard intensity unaccountable in incidental talk like this.

Deronda wondered at her choice of subjects. A painful impression arrested his answer a moment, but at last he said, with a graver, deeper intonation, ‘Why then, after all, I prefer my place to theirs.’

‘There I believe you are right,’ said Gwendolen, with a sudden little laugh, and turned to join the group at the piano.

Deronda looked round for Grandcourt, wondering whether he followed his bride’s movements with any attention; but it was rather undiscerning in him to suppose that he could find out the fact. Grandcourt had a delusive mood of observing whatever had an interest for him, which could be surpassed by no sleepy-eyed animal on the watch for prey. At that moment he was plunged in the depth of an easy-chair, being talked to by Mr Vandernoodt, who apparently thought the acquaintance of such a bridegroom worth cultivating; and an incautious person might have supposed it safe to telegraph secrets in front of him, the common prejudice being that your quick observer is one whose eyes have quick movements. Not at all. If you want a respectable witness who will see nothing inconvenient, choose a vivacious gentleman, very much on the alert, with two eyes wide open, a glass in one of them, and an entire impartiality as to the purpose of looking. If Grandcourt cared to keep any one under his power he saw them out of the corners of his long narrow eyes, and if they went behind him, he had a constructive process by which he knew what they were doing there. He knew perfectly well where his wife was, and how she was behaving. Was he going to be a jealous husband? Deronda imagined that to be likely; but his imagination was as much astray about Grandcourt as it would have been about an unexplored continent where all the species were peculiar. He did not conceive that he himself was a likely subject of jealousy, or that he should give any pretext for it; but the suspicion that a wife is not happy naturally leads one to speculate on the husband’s private deportment; and Deronda found himself after one o’clock in the morning in the rather ludicrous position of sitting up severely holding a Hebrew grammar in his hands (for somehow, in deference to Mordecai, he had begun to study Hebrew), with the consciousness that he had been in that attitude nearly an hour, and had thought of nothing but Gwendolen and her husband. To be an unusual young man means for the most part to get a difficult mastery over the usual, which is often like the sprite of ill-luck you pack up your goods to escape from, and see grinning at you from the top of your luggage-van. The peculiarities of Deronda’s nature had been acutely touched by the brief incidents and words which made the history of his intercourse with Gwendolen; and this evening’s slight addition had given them an importunate recurrence. It was not vanity – it was ready sympathy that had made him alive to a certain appealingness in her behaviour towards him; and the difficulty with which she had seemed to raise her eyes to bow to him, in the first instance, was to be interpreted now by that unmistakeable look of involuntary confidence which she had afterwards turned on him under the consciousness of his approach.

‘What is the use of it all?’ thought Deronda, as he threw down his grammar, and began to undress. ‘I can’t do anything to help her – nobody can, if she has found out her mistake already. And it seems to me that she has a dreary lack of the ideas that might help her. Strange and piteous to think what a centre of wretchedness a delicate piece of human flesh like that might be, wrapped round with fine raiment, her ears pierced for gems, her head held loftily, her mouth all smiling pretence, the poor soul within her sitting in sick distaste of all things! But what do I know of her? There may be a demon in her to match the worst husband, for what I can tell. She was clearly an ill-educated, worldly girl: perhaps she is a coquette.’

This last reflection, not much believed in, was a self-administered dose of caution, prompted partly by Sir Hugo’s much-contemned joking on the subject of flirtation. Deronda resolved not to volunteer any *tête-à-tête* with Gwendolen during the few days of her stay at the Abbey; and he was capable of keeping a resolve in spite of much inclination to the contrary.

But a man cannot resolve about a woman’s actions, least of all about those of a woman like Gwendolen, in whose nature there was a combination of proud reserve with rashness, of perilously-poised terror with defiance, which might alternately flatter and disappoint control. Few words could less represent her than ‘coquette.’ She had a native love of homage, and belief in her own power; but no cold artifice for the sake of enslaving. And the poor thing’s belief in her power, with her other dreams before marriage, had often to be thrust aside now like the toys of a sick child, which it looks at with dull eyes, and has no heart to play with, however it may try.

The next day at lunch Sir Hugo said to her, ‘The thaw has gone on like magic, and it’s so pleasant out of doors just now – shall we go and see the stables and the other old bits about the place?’

‘Yes, pray,’ said Gwendolen. ‘You will like to see the stables, Henleigh?’ she added, looking at her husband.

‘Uncommonly,’ said Grandcourt, with an indifference which seemed to give irony to the word, as he returned her look. It was the first time Deronda had seen them speak to each other since their arrival, and he

thought their exchange of looks as cold and official as if it had been a ceremony to keep up a charter. Still, the English fondness for reserve will account for much negation; and Grandcourt's manners with an extra veil of reserve over them might be expected to present the extreme type of the national taste.

'Who else is inclined to make the tour of the house and premises?' said Sir Hugo. 'The ladies must muffle themselves: there is only just about time to do it well before sunset. You will go, Dan, won't you?'

'Oh, yes,' said Deronda, carelessly, knowing that Sir Hugo would think any excuse disobliging.

'All meet in the library, then, when they are ready – say in half an hour,' said the baronet. Gwendolen made herself ready with wonderful quickness, and in ten minutes came down into the library in her sables, plume, and little thick boots. As soon as she entered the room she was aware that some one else was there: it was precisely what she had hoped for. Deronda was standing with his back towards her at the far end of the room, and was looking over a newspaper. How could little thick boots make any noise on an Axminster carpet? And to cough would have seemed an intended signalling which her pride could not condescend to; also, she felt bashful about walking up to him and letting him know that she was there, though it was her hunger to speak to him which had set her imagination on constructing this chance of finding him, and had made her hurry down, as birds hover near the water which they dare not drink. Always uneasily dubious about his opinion of her, she felt a peculiar anxiety to-day, lest he might think of her with contempt, as one triumphantly conscious of being Grandcourt's wife, the future lady of this domain. It was her habitual effort now to magnify the satisfactions of her pride, on which she nourished her strength; but somehow Deronda's being there disturbed them all. There was not the faintest touch of coquetry in the attitude of her mind towards him: he was unique to her among men, because he had impressed her as being not her admirer but her superior: in some mysterious way he was becoming a part of her conscience, as one woman whose nature is an object of reverential belief may become a new conscience to a man.

And now he would not look round and find out that she was there! The paper crackled in his hand, his head rose and sank, exploring those stupid columns, and he was evidently stroking his beard, as if this world were a very easy affair to her. Of course all the rest of the company would soon be down, and the opportunity of her saying something to efface her flippancy of the evening before, would be quite gone. She felt sick with irritation – so fast do young creatures like her absorb misery through invisible suckers of their own fancies – and her face had gathered that peculiar expression which comes with a mortification to which tears are forbidden.

At last he threw down the paper and turned round.

'Oh, you are there already,' he said, coming forward a step or two; 'I must go and put on my coat.'

He turned aside and walked out of the room. This was behaving quite badly. Mere politeness would have made him stay to exchange some words before leaving her alone. It was true that Grandcourt came in with Sir Hugo immediately after, so that the words must have been too few to be worth anything. As it was, they saw him walking from the library door.

'A – you look rather ill,' said Grandcourt, going straight up to her, standing in front of her, and looking into her eyes. 'Do you feel equal to the walk?'

'Yes, I shall like it,' said Gwendolen, without the slightest movement except this of the lips.

'We could put off going over the house, you know, and only go out of doors,' said Sir Hugo, kindly, while Grandcourt turned aside.

'Oh dear no!' said Gwendolen, speaking with determination; 'let us put off nothing. I want a long walk.'

The rest of the walking party – two ladies and two gentlemen besides Deronda – had now assembled; and Gwendolen, rallying, went with due cheerfulness by the side of Sir Hugo, paying apparently an equal attention to the commentaries Deronda was called upon to give on the various architectural fragments, and to Sir Hugo's reasons for not attempting to remedy the mixture of the undisguised modern with the antique – which in his opinion only made the place the more truly historical. On their way to the buttery and kitchen they took the outside of the house and paused before a beautiful pointed doorway, which was the only old remnant in the east front.

'Well, now, to my mind,' said Sir Hugo, 'that is more interesting standing as it is in the middle of what is frankly four centuries later, than if the whole front had been dressed up in a pretence of the thirteenth century. Additions ought to smack of the time when they are made and carry the stamp of their period. I wouldn't destroy any old bits, but that notion of reproducing the old is a mistake, I think. At least, if a man likes to do it he must pay for his whistle. Besides, where are you to stop along that road – making loopholes where you don't want to peep, and so on? You may as well ask me to wear out the stones with kneeling; eh, Grandcourt?'

'A confounded nuisance,' drawled Grandcourt. 'I hate fellows wanting to howl litanies – acting the greatest bores that have ever existed.'

'Well, yes, that's what their romanticism must come to,' said Sir Hugo, in a tone of confidential assent –

‘that is, if they carry it out logically.’

‘I think that way of arguing against a course because it may be ridden down to an absurdity would soon bring life to a standstill,’ said Deronda. ‘It is not the logic of human action, but of a roasting-jack, that must go on to the last turn when it has been once wound up. We can do nothing safely without some judgment as to where we are to stop.’

‘I find the rule of the pocket the best guide,’ said Sir Hugo, laughingly. ‘And as for most of your new-old building, you had need to hire men to scratch and chip it all over artistically to give it an elderly-looking surface; which at the present rate of labour would not answer.’

‘Do you want to keep up the old fashions, then, Mr Deronda?’ said Gwendolen, taking advantage of the freedom of grouping to fall back a little, while Sir Hugo and Grandcourt went on.

‘Some of them. I don’t see why we should not use our choice there as we do elsewhere – or why either age or novelty by itself is an argument for or against. To delight in doing things because our fathers did them is good if it shuts out nothing better; it enlarges the range of affection – and affection is the broadest basis of good in life.’

‘Do you think so?’ said Gwendolen, with a little surprise. ‘I should have thought you cared most about ideas, knowledge, wisdom, and all that.’

‘But to care about *them* is a sort of affection,’ said Deronda, smiling at her sudden *naïveté*. ‘Call it attachment, interest, willingness to bear a great deal for the sake of being with them and saving them from injury. Of course it makes a difference if the objects of interest are human beings; but generally in all deep affections the objects are a mixture – half persons and half ideas – sentiments and affections flow in together.’

‘I wonder whether I understand that,’ said Gwendolen, putting up her chin in her old saucy manner. ‘I believe I am not very affectionate; perhaps you mean to tell me, that is the reason why I don’t see much good in life.’

‘No, I did *not* mean to tell you that; but I admit that I should think it true if I believed what you say of yourself,’ said Deronda, gravely.

Here Sir Hugo and Grandcourt turned round and paused.

‘I never can get Mr Deronda to pay me a compliment,’ said Gwendolen. ‘I have quite a curiosity to see whether a little flattery can be extracted from him.’

‘Ah!’ said Sir Hugo, glancing at Deronda, ‘the fact is, it is hopeless to flatter a bride. We give it up in despair. She has been so fed on sweet speeches that everything we say seems tasteless.’

‘Quite true,’ said Gwendolen, bending her head and smiling. ‘Mr Grandcourt won me by neatly-turned compliments. If there had been one word out of place it would have been fatal.’

‘Do you hear that?’ said Sir Hugo, looking at the husband.

‘Yes,’ said Grandcourt, without change of countenance. ‘It is a deucedly hard thing to keep up, though.’

All this seemed to Sir Hugo a natural playfulness between such a husband and wife; but Deronda wondered at the misleading alternations in Gwendolen’s manner, which at one moment seemed to invite sympathy by childlike indiscretion, at another to repel it by proud concealment. He tried to keep out of her way by devoting himself to Miss Juliet Fenn, a young lady whose profile had been so unfavourably decided by circumstances over which she had no control, that Gwendolen some months ago had felt it impossible to be jealous of her. Nevertheless when they were seeing the kitchen – a part of the original building in perfect preservation – the depth of shadow in the niches of the stone walls and groined vault, the play of light from the huge glowing fire on polished tin, brass, and copper, the fine resonance that came with every sound of voice or metal, were all spoiled for Gwendolen, and Sir Hugo’s speech about them was made rather importunate, because Deronda was discoursing to the other ladies and kept at a distance from her. It did not signify that the other gentlemen took the opportunity of being near her: of what use in the world was their admiration while she had an uneasy sense that there was some standard in Deronda’s mind which measured her into littleness? Mr Vandernoodt, who had the mania of always describing one thing while you were looking at another, was quite intolerable with his insistance on Lord Blough’s kitchen, which he had seen in the north.

‘Pray don’t ask us to see two kitchens at once. It makes the heat double. I must really go out of it,’ she cried at last, marching resolutely into the open air, and leaving the others in the rear. Grandcourt was already out, and as she joined him, he said –

‘I wondered how long you meant to stay in that damned place’ – one of the freedoms he had assumed as a husband being the use of his strongest epithets. Gwendolen, turning to see the rest of the party approach, said –

‘It was certainly rather too warm in one’s wraps.’

They walked on the gravel across a green court, where the snow still lay in islets on the grass, and in masses on the boughs of the great cedar and the crenelated coping of the stone walls, and then into a larger court,

where there was another cedar, to find the beautiful choir long ago turned into stables, in the first instance perhaps after an impromptu fashion by troopers, who had a pious satisfaction in insulting the priests of Baal and the images of Ashtoreth, the queen of heaven. The exterior – its west end, save for the stable door, walled in with brick and covered with ivy – was much defaced, maimed of finial and gurgoyle, the friable limestone broken and fretted, and lending its soft grey to a powdery dark lichen; the long windows, too, were filled in with brick as far as the springing of the arches, the broad clerestory windows with wire or ventilating blinds. With the low wintry afternoon sun upon it, sending shadows from the cedar boughs, and lighting up the touches of snow remaining on every ledge, it had still a scarcely disturbed aspect of antique solemnity, which gave the scene in the interior rather a startling effect; though, ecclesiastical or reverential indignation apart, the eyes could hardly help dwelling with pleasure on its piquant picturesqueness. Each finely-arched chapel was turned into a stall, where in the dusty glazing of the windows there still gleamed patches of crimson, orange, blue, and palest violet; for the rest, the choir had been gutted, the floor levelled, paved, and drained according to the most approved fashion, and a line of loose-boxes erected in the middle: a soft light fell from the upper windows on sleek brown or grey flanks and haunches; on mild equine faces looking out with active nostrils over the varnished brown boarding; on the hay hanging from racks where the saints once looked down from the altar pieces, and on the pale golden straw scattered or in heaps; on a little white-and-liver-coloured spaniel making his bed on the back of an elderly hackney, and on four ancient angels, still showing signs of devotion like mutilated martyrs – while over all, the grand pointed roof, untouched by reforming wash, showed its lines and colours mysteriously through veiling shadow and cobweb, and a hoof now and then striking against the boards seemed to fill the vault with thunder, while outside there was the answering bay of the blood-hounds.

'Oh, this is glorious!' Gwendolen burst forth, in forgetfulness of everything but the immediate impression: there had been a little intoxication for her in the grand spaces of courts and building, and the fact of her being an important person among them. 'This *is* glorious! Only I wish there were a horse in every one of the boxes. I would ten times rather have these stables than those at Diplow.'

But she had no sooner said this than some consciousness arrested her, and involuntarily she turned her eyes towards Deronda, who oddly enough had taken off his felt hat and stood holding it before him as if they had entered a room or an actual church. He, like others, happened to be looking at her, and their eyes met – to her intense vexation, for it seemed to her that by looking at him she had betrayed the reference of her thoughts, and she felt herself blushing: she exaggerated the impression that even Sir Hugo as well as Deronda would have of her bad taste in referring to the possession of anything at the Abbey: as for Deronda, she had probably made him despise her. Her annoyance at what she imagined to be the obviousness of her confusion robbed her of her usual facility in carrying it off by playful speech, and turning up her face to look at the roof, she wheeled away in that attitude. If any had noticed her blush as significant, they had certainly not interpreted it by the secret windings and recesses of her feeling. A blush is no language: only a dubious flag-signal which may mean either of two contradictories. Deronda alone had a faint guess at some part of her feeling; but while he was observing her he was himself under observation.

'Do you take off your hat to the horses?' said Grandcourt, with a slight sneer.

'Why not?' said Deronda, covering himself. He had really taken off the hat automatically, and if he had been an ugly man might doubtless have done so with impunity: ugliness having naturally the air of involuntary exposure, and beauty, of display.

Gwendolen's confusion was soon merged in the survey of the horses, which Grandcourt politely abstained from appraising, languidly assenting to Sir Hugo's alternate depreciation and eulogy of the same animal, as one that he should not have bought when he was younger, and piqued himself on his horses, but yet one that had better qualities than many more expensive brutes.

'The fact is, stables dive deeper and deeper into the pocket nowadays, and I am very glad to have got rid of that *démangeaison*,' said Sir Hugo, as they were coming out.

'What is a man to do, though?' said Grandcourt. 'He must ride. I don't see what else there is to do. And I don't call it riding to sit astride a set of brutes with every deformity under the sun.'

This delicate diplomatic way of characterising Sir Hugo's stud did not require direct notice; and the baronet feeling that the conversation had worn rather thin, said to the party generally, 'Now we are going to see the cloister – the finest bit of all – in perfect preservation: the monks might have been walking there yesterday.'

But Gwendolen had lingered behind to look at the kennelled blood-hounds, perhaps because she felt a little dispirited; and Grandcourt waited for her.

'You had better take my arm,' he said, in his low tone of command; and she took it.

'It's a great bore being dragged about in this way, and no cigar,' said Grandcourt.

'I thought you would like it.'

'Like it! – one eternal chatter. And encouraging those ugly girls – inviting one to meet such monsters. How

that *fat* Deronda can bear looking at her —'

'Why do you call him a *fat*? Do you object to him so much?'

'Object? no. What do I care about his being a *fat*? It's of no consequence to me. I'll invite him to Diplow again if you like.'

'I don't think he would come. He is too clever and learned to care about *us*,' said Gwendolen, thinking it useful for her husband to be told (privately) that it was possible for him to be looked down upon.

'I never saw that make much difference in a man. Either he is a gentleman, or he is not,' said Grandcourt.

That a new husband and wife should snatch a moment's *tête-à-tête* was what could be understood and indulged; and the rest of the party left them in the rear till, re-entering the garden, they all paused in that cloistered court where, among the falling rose-petals thirteen years before, we saw a boy becoming acquainted with his first sorrow. This cloister was built of harder stone than the church, and had been in greater safety from the wearing weather. It was a rare example of a northern cloister with arched and pillared openings not intended for glazing, and the delicately-wrought foliage of the capitals seemed still to carry the very touches of the chisel. Gwendolen had dropped her husband's arm and joined the other ladies, to whom Deronda was noticing the delicate sense which had combined freedom with accuracy in the imitation of natural forms.

'I wonder whether one oftener learns to love real objects through their representations, or the representations through the real objects,' he said, after pointing out a lovely capital made by the curled leaves of greens, showing their reticulated under-side with the firm gradual swell of its central rib. 'When I was a little fellow these capitals taught me to observe, and delight in, the structure of leaves.'

'I suppose you can see every line of them with your eyes shut,' said Juliet Fenn.

'Yes. I was always repeating them, because for a good many years this court stood for me as my only image of a convent, and whenever I read of monks and monasteries, this was my scenery for them.'

'You must love this place very much,' said Miss Fenn, innocently, not thinking of inheritance. 'So many homes are like twenty others. But this is unique, and you seem to know every cranny of it. I daresay you could never love another home so well.'

'Oh, I carry it with me,' said Deronda, quietly, being used to all possible thoughts of this kind. 'To most men their early home is no more than a memory of their early years, and I'm not sure but they have the best of it. The image is never marred. There's no disappointment in memory, and one's exaggerations are always on the good side.'

Gwendolen felt sure that he spoke in that way out of delicacy to her and Grandcourt – because he knew they must hear him; and that he probably thought of her as a selfish creature who only cared about possessing things in her own person. But whatever he might say, it must have been a secret hardship to him that any circumstances of his birth had shut him out from the inheritance of his father's position; and if he supposed that she exulted in her husband's taking it, what could he feel for her but scornful pity? Indeed it seemed clear to her that he was avoiding her, and preferred talking to others – which nevertheless was not kind in him.

With these thoughts in her mind she was prevented by a mixture of pride and timidity from addressing him again, and when they were looking at the rows of quaint portraits in the gallery above the cloisters, she kept up her air of interest and made her vivacious remarks without any direct appeal to Deronda. But at the end she was very weary of her assumed spirits, and as Grandcourt turned into the billiard-room, she went to the pretty boudoir which had been assigned to her, and shut herself up to look melancholy at her ease. No chemical process shows a more wonderful activity than the transforming influence of the thoughts we imagine to be going on in another. Changes in theory, religion, admirations, may begin with a suspicion of dissent or disapproval, even when the grounds of disapproval are but matter of searching conjecture.

Poor Gwendolen was conscious of an uneasy, transforming process – all the old nature shaken to its depths, its hopes spoiled, its pleasures perturbed, but still showing wholeness and strength in the will to reassert itself. After every new shock of humiliation she tried to adjust herself and seize her old supports – proud concealment, trust in new excitements that would make life go by without much thinking; trust in some deed of reparation to nullify her self-blame and shield her from a vague, ever-visiting dread of some horrible calamity; trust in the hardening effect of use and wont that would make her indifferent to her miseries.

Yes – miseries. This beautiful, healthy young creature, with her two-and-twenty years and her gratified ambition, no longer felt inclined to kiss her fortunate image in the glass; she looked at it with wonder that she could be so miserable. One belief which had accompanied her through her unmarried life as a self-cajoling superstition, encouraged by the subordination of every one about her – the belief in her own power of dominating – was utterly gone. Already, in seven short weeks, which seemed half her life, her husband had gained a mastery which she could no more resist than she could have resisted the benumbing effect from the touch of a torpedo. Gwendolen's will had seemed imperious in its small girlish sway; but it was the will of a creature with a large discourse of imaginative fears: a shadow would have been enough to relax its hold. And she had found a will like that of a crab or a boa-constrictor which goes on pinching or crushing without alarm

at thunder. Not that Grandcourt was without calculation of the intangible effects which were the chief means of mastery; indeed he had a surprising acuteness in detecting that situation of feeling in Gwendolen which made her proud and rebellious spirit dumb and helpless before him.

She had burnt Lydia Glasher's letter with an instantaneous terror lest other eyes should see it, and had tenaciously concealed from Grandcourt that there was any other cause of her violent hysterics than the excitement and fatigue of the day: she had been urged into an implied falsehood. 'Don't ask me – it was my feeling about everything – it was the sudden change from home.' The words of that letter kept repeating themselves, and hung on her consciousness with the weight of a prophetic doom. 'I am the grave in which your chance of happiness is buried as well as mine. You had your warning. You have chosen to injure me and my children. He had meant to marry me. He would have married me at last, if you had not broken your word. You will have your punishment. I desire it with all my soul. Will you give him this letter to set him against me and ruin us more – me and my children? Shall you like to stand before your husband with these diamonds on you, and these words of mine in his thoughts and yours? Will he think you have any right to complain when he has made you miserable? You took him with your eyes open. The willing wrong you have done me will be your curse.'

The words had nestled their venomous life within her, and stirred continually the vision of the scene at the Whispering Stones. That scene was now like an accusing apparition: she dreaded that Grandcourt should know of it – so far out of her sight now was that possibility she had once satisfied herself with, of speaking to him about Mrs Glasher and her children, and making them rich amends. Any endurance seemed easier than the mortal humiliation of confessing that she knew all before she married him, and in marrying him had broken her word. For the reasons by which she had justified herself when the marriage tempted her, and all her easy arrangement of her future power over her husband to make him do better than he might be inclined to do, were now as futile as the burnt-out lights which set off a child's pageant. Her sense of being blameworthy was exaggerated by a dread both definite and vague. The definite dread was lest the veil of secrecy should fall between her and Grandcourt, and give him the right to taunt her. With the reading of that letter had begun her husband's empire of fear.

And her husband all the while knew it. He had not, indeed, any distinct knowledge of her broken promise, and would not have rated highly the effect of that breach on her conscience; but he was aware not only of what Lush had told him about the meeting at the Whispering Stones, but also of Gwendolen's concealment as to the cause of her sudden illness. He felt sure that Lydia had enclosed something with the diamonds, and that this something, whatever it was, had at once created in Gwendolen a new repulsion for him and a reason for not daring to manifest it. He did not greatly mind, or feel as many men might have felt, that his hopes in marriage were blighted: he had wanted to marry Gwendolen, and he was not a man to repent. Why should a gentleman whose other relations in life are carried on without the luxury of sympathetic feeling, be supposed to require that kind of condiment in domestic life? What he chiefly felt was that a change had come over the conditions of his mastery, which, far from shaking it, might establish it the more thoroughly. And it was established. He judged that he had not married a simpleton unable to perceive the impossibility of escape, or to see alternative evils: he had married a girl who had spirit and pride enough not to make a fool of herself by forfeiting all the advantages of a position which had attracted her; and if she wanted pregnant hints to help her in making up her mind properly he would take care not to withhold them.

Gwendolen, indeed, with all that gnawing trouble in her consciousness, had hardly for a moment dropped the sense that it was her part to bear herself with dignity, and appear what is called happy. In disclosure of disappointment or sorrow she saw nothing but a humiliation which would have been vinegar to her wounds. Whatever her husband might come at last to be to her, she meant to wear the yoke so as not to be pitied. For she did think of the coming years with presentiment: she was frightened at Grandcourt. The poor thing had passed from her girlish sauciness of superiority over this inert specimen of personal distinction into an amazed perception of her former ignorance about the possible mental attitude of a man towards the woman he sought in marriage – of her present ignorance as to what their life with each other might turn into. For novelty gives immeasurableness to fear, and fills the early time of all sad changes with phantoms of the future. Her little coquetries, voluntary or involuntary, had told on Grandcourt during courtship, and formed a medium of communication between them, showing him in the light of a creature such as she could understand and manage: but marriage had nullified all such interchange, and Grandcourt had become a blank uncertainty to her in everything but this, that he would do just what he willed, and that she had neither devices at her command to determine his will, nor any rational means of escaping it.

What had occurred between them about her wearing the diamonds was typical. One evening, shortly before they came to the Abbey, they were going to dine at Brackenshaw Castle. Gwendolen had said to herself that she would never wear those diamonds: they had horrible words clinging and crawling about them, as from some bad dream, whose images lingered on the perturbed sense. She came down dressed in her white, with

only a streak of gold and a pendant of emeralds, which Grandcourt had given her, round her neck, and little emerald stars in her ears.

Grandcourt stood with his back to the fire and looked at her as she entered.

'Am I altogether as you like?' she said, speaking rather gaily. She was not without enjoyment in this occasion of going to Brackenshaw Castle with her new dignities upon her, as men whose affairs are sadly involved will enjoy dining out among persons likely to be under a pleasant mistake about them.

'No,' said Grandcourt.

Gwendolen felt suddenly uncomfortable, wondering what was to come. She was not unprepared for some struggle about the diamonds; but suppose he were going to say, in low contemptuous tones, 'You are not in any way what I like.' It was very bad for her to be secretly hating him; but it would be much worse when he gave the first sign of hating her.

'Oh, mercy!' she exclaimed, the pause lasting till she could bear it no longer. 'How am I to alter myself?'

'Put on the diamonds,' said Grandcourt, looking straight at her with his narrow glance.

Gwendolen paused in her turn, afraid of showing any emotion, and feeling that nevertheless there was some change in her eyes as they met his. But she was obliged to answer, and said as indifferently as she could, 'Oh, please not. I don't think diamonds suit me.'

'What you think has nothing to do with it,' said Grandcourt, his *sotto voce* imperiousness seeming to have an evening quietude and finish, like his toilet. 'I wish you to wear the diamonds.'

'Pray excuse me; I like these emeralds,' said Gwendolen, frightened in spite of her preparation. That white hand of his which was touching his whisker was capable, she fancied, of clinging round her neck and threatening to throttle her; for her fear of him, mingling with the vague foreboding of some retributive calamity which hung about her life, had reached a superstitious point.

'Oblige me by telling me your reason for not wearing the diamonds when I desire it,' said Grandcourt. His eyes were still fixed upon her, and she felt her own eyes narrowing under them as if to shut out an entering pain.

Of what use was the rebellion within her? She could say nothing that would not hurt her worse than submission. Turning slowly and covering herself again, she went to her dressing-room. As she reached out the diamonds it occurred to her that her unwillingness to wear them might have already raised a suspicion in Grandcourt that she had some knowledge about them which he had not given her. She fancied that his eyes showed a delight in torturing her. How could she be defiant? She had nothing to say that would touch him – nothing but what would give him a more painful grasp on her consciousness.

'He delights in making the dogs and horses quail: that is half his pleasure in calling them his,' she said to herself, as she opened the jewel-case with a shivering sensation. 'It will come to be so with me; and I shall quail. What else is there for me? I will not say to the world, "Pity me." '

She was about to ring for her maid when she heard the door open behind her. It was Grandcourt who came in.

'You want some one to fasten them,' he said, coming towards her.

She did not answer, but simply stood still, leaving him to take out the ornaments and fasten them as he would. Doubtless he had been used to fasten them on some one else. With a bitter sort of sarcasm against herself, Gwendolen thought, 'What a privilege this is, to have robbed another woman of!'

'What makes you so cold?' said Grandcourt, when he had fastened the last earring. 'Pray put plenty of furs on. I hate to see a woman come into a room looking frozen. If you are to appear as a bride at all, appear decently.'

This marital speech was not exactly persuasive, but it touched the quick of Gwendolen's pride and forced her to rally. The words of the bad dream crawled about the diamonds still, but only for her: to others they were brilliants that suited her perfectly, and Grandcourt inwardly observed that she answered to the rein.

'Oh yes, mamma, quite happy,' Gwendolen had said on her return to Diplow. 'Not at all disappointed in Ryelands. It is a much finer place than this – larger in every way. But don't you want some more money?'

'Did you not know that Mr Grandcourt left me a letter on your wedding-day? I am to have eight hundred a-year. He wishes me to keep Offendene for the present, while you are at Diplow. But if there were some pretty cottage near the park at Ryelands we might live there without much expense, and I should have you most of the year, perhaps.'

'We must leave that to Mr Grandcourt, mamma.'

'Oh, certainly. It is exceedingly handsome of him to say that he will pay the rent for Offendene till June. And we can go on very well – without any man-servant except Crane, just for out of doors. Our good Merry will stay with us and help me to manage everything. It is natural that Mr Grandcourt should wish me to live in a good style of house in your neighbourhood, and I cannot decline. So he said nothing about it to you?'

'No; he wished me to hear it from you, I suppose.'

Gwendolen in fact had been very anxious to have some definite knowledge of what would be done for her mother, but at no moment since her marriage had she been able to overcome the difficulty of mentioning the subject to Grandcourt. Now, however, she had a sense of obligation which would not let her rest without saying to him, 'It is very good of you to provide for mamma: You took a great deal on yourself in marrying a girl who had nothing but relations belonging to her.'

Grandcourt was smoking, and only said carelessly, 'Of course I was not going to let her live like a gamekeeper's mother.'

'At least he is not mean about money,' thought Gwendolen, 'and mamma is the better off for my marriage.'

She often pursued the comparison between what might have been, if she had not married Grandcourt, and what actually was, trying to persuade herself that life generally was barren of satisfaction, and that if she had chosen differently she might not have been looking back with a regret as bitter as the feeling she was trying to argue away. Her mother's dulness, which used to irritate her, she was at present inclined to explain as the ordinary result of women's experience. True, she still saw that she would 'manage differently from mamma;' but her management now only meant that she would carry her troubles with spirit, and let none suspect them. By-and-by she promised herself that she should get used to her heart-sores, and find excitements that would carry her through life, as a hard gallop carried her through some of the morning hours. There was gambling: she had heard stories at Leubronn of fashionable women who gambled in all sorts of ways. It seemed very flat to her at this distance, but perhaps if she began to gamble again, the passion might awake. Then there was the pleasure of producing an effect by her appearance in society: what did celebrated beauties do in town when their husbands could afford display? All men were fascinated by them: they had a perfect equipage and toilet, walked into public places, and bowed, and made the usual answers, and walked out again: perhaps they bought china, and practised accomplishments. If she could only feel a keen appetite for those pleasures – could only believe in pleasure as she used to do! Accomplishments had ceased to have the exciting quality of promising any pre-eminence to her; and as for fascinated gentlemen – adorers who might hover round her with languishment, and diversify married life with the romantic stir of mystery, passion, and danger which her French reading had given her some girlish notion of – they presented themselves to her imagination with the fatal circumstance that, instead of fascinating her in return, they were clad in her own weariness and disgust. The admiring male, rashly adjusting the expression of his features and the turn of his conversation to her supposed tastes, had always been an absurd object to her, and at present seemed rather detestable. Many courses are actually pursued – follies and sins both convenient and inconvenient – without pleasure or hope of pleasure; but to solace ourselves with imagining any course beforehand, there must be some foretaste of pleasure in the shape of appetite; and Gwendolen's appetite had sickened. Let her wander over the possibilities of her life as she would, an uncertain shadow dogged her. Her confidence in herself and her destiny had turned into remorse and dread; she trusted neither herself nor her future.

This hidden helplessness gave fresh force to the hold Deronda had from the first taken on her mind, as one who had an unknown standard by which he judged her. Had he some way of looking at things which might be a new footing for her – an inward safeguard against possible events which she dreaded as stored-up retribution? It is one of the secrets in that change of mental poise which has been fitly named conversion, that to many among us neither heaven nor earth has any revelation till some personality touches theirs with a peculiar influence, subduing them into receptiveness. It had been Gwendolen's habit to think of the persons around her as stale books, too familiar to be interesting. Deronda had lit up her attention with a sense of novelty: not by words only, but by imagined facts, his influence had entered into the current of that self-suspicion and self-blame which awakens a new consciousness.

'I wish he could know everything about me without my telling him,' was one of her thoughts, as she sat leaning over the end of a couch, supporting her head with her hand, and looking at herself in a mirror – not in admiration, but in a sad kind of companionship. 'I wish he knew that I am not so contemptible as he thinks me – that I am in deep trouble, and want to be something better if I could.' Without the aid of sacred ceremony or costume, her feelings had turned this man, only a few years older than herself, into a priest; a sort of trust less rare than the fidelity that guards it. Young reverence for one who is also young is the most coercive of all: there is the same level of temptation, and the higher motive is believed in as a fuller force – not suspected to be a mere residue from weary experience.

But the coercion is often stronger on the one who takes the reverence. Those who trust us educate us. And perhaps in that ideal consecration of Gwendolen's, some education was being prepared for Deronda.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Rien ne pèse tant qu'un secret,
Le porter loin est difficile aux dames:
Et je sçais mesme sur ce fait
Bon nombre d'hommes qui sont femmes.

– LA FONTAINE[13]

Meanwhile Deronda had been fastened and led off by Mr Vandernoodt, who wished for a brisker walk, a cigar, and a little gossip. Since we cannot tell a man his own secrets, the restraint of being in his company often breeds a desire to pair off in conversation with some more ignorant person, and Mr Vandernoodt presently said –

'What a washed-out piece of cambric Grandcourt is! But if he is a favourite of yours, I withdraw the remark.'

'Not the least in the world,' said Deronda.

'I thought not. One wonders how he came to have a great passion again; and he must have had – to marry in this way. Though Lush, his old chum, hints that he married this girl out of obstinacy. By George! it was a very accountable obstinacy. A man might make up his mind to marry her without the stimulus of contradiction. But he must have made himself a pretty large drain of money, eh?'

'I know nothing of his affairs.'

'What! not of the other establishment he keeps up?'

'Diplow? Of course. He took that of Sir Hugo. But merely for the year.'

'No, no: not Diplow: Gadsmere. Sir Hugo knows, I'll answer for it.'

Deronda said nothing. He really began to feel some curiosity, but he foresaw that he should hear what Mr Vandernoodt had to tell, without the condescension of asking.

'Lush would not altogether own to it, of course. He's a confidant and go-between of Grandcourt's. But I have it on the best authority. The fact is, there's another lady with four children at Gadsmere. She has had the upper hand of him these ten years and more, and by what I can understand has it still – left her husband for him, and used to travel with him everywhere. Her husband's dead now: I found a fellow who was in the same regiment with him, and knew this Mrs Glasher before she took wing. A fiery dark-eyed woman – a noted beauty at that time – he thought she was dead. They say she has Grandcourt under her thumb still, and it's a wonder he didn't marry her, for there's a very fine boy, and I understand Grandcourt can do absolutely as he pleases with the estates. Lush told me as much as that.'

'What right had he to marry this girl?' said Deronda, with disgust.

Mr Vandernoodt, adjusting the end of his cigar, shrugged his shoulders and put out his lips.

'*She* can know nothing of it,' said Deronda, emphatically. But that positive statement was immediately followed by an inward query – 'Could she have known anything of it?'

'It's rather a piquant picture,' said Mr Vandernoodt – 'Grandcourt between two fiery women. For depend upon it this light-haired one has plenty of devil in her. I formed that opinion of her at Leubronn. It's a sort of Medea and Creüsa business. Fancy the two meeting! Grandcourt is a new kind of Jason: I wonder what sort of a part he'll make of it. It's a dog's part at best. I think I hear Ristori now, saying, "Jasone! Jasone!" These fine women generally get hold of a stick.'

'Grandcourt can bite, I fancy,' said Deronda. 'He is no stick.'

'No, no; I meant Jason. I can't quite make out Grandcourt. But he's a keen fellow enough – uncommonly well built too. And if he comes into all this property, the estates will bear dividing. This girl, whose friends had come to beggary, I understand, may think herself lucky to get him. I don't want to be hard on a man because he gets involved in an affair of that sort. But he might make himself more agreeable. I was telling him a capital story last night, and he got up and walked away in the middle. I felt inclined to kick him. Do you suppose that is inattention or insolence, now?'

'Oh, a mixture. He generally observes the forms; but he doesn't listen much,' said Deronda. Then, after a moment's pause, he went on, 'I should think there must be some exaggeration or inaccuracy in what you have

heard about this lady at Gadsmere.'

'Not a bit, depend upon it; it has all lain snug of late years. People have forgotten all about it. But there the nest is, and the birds are in it. And I know Grandcourt goes there. I have good evidence that he goes there. However, that's nobody's business but his own. The affair has sunk below the surface.'

'I wonder you could have learned so much about it,' said Deronda, rather drily.

'Oh, there are plenty of people who knew all about it; but such stories get packed away like old letters. They interest me. I like to know the manners of my time – contemporary gossip, not antediluvian. These Dryasdust fellows get a reputation by raking up some small scandal about Semiramis or Nitocris, and then we have a thousand and one poems written upon it by all the warblers big and little. But I don't care a straw about the *faux pas* of the mummies. You do, though. You are one of the historical men – more interested in a lady when she's got a rag face and skeleton toes peeping out. Does that flatter your imagination?'

'Well, if she had any woes in her love, one has the satisfaction of knowing that she's well out of them.'

'Ah, you are thinking of the Medea, I see.'

Deronda then chose to point to some giant oaks worth looking at in their bareness. He also felt an interest in this piece of contemporary gossip, but he was satisfied that Mr Vandernoodt had no more to tell about it.

Since the early days when he tried to construct the hidden story of his own birth, his mind had perhaps never been so active in weaving probabilities about any private affair as it had now begun to be about Gwendolen's marriage. This unavowed relation of Grandcourt's, – could she have gained some knowledge of it, which caused her to shrink from the match – a shrinking finally overcome by the urgence of poverty? He could recall almost every word she had said to him, and in certain of these words he seemed to discern that she was conscious of having done some wrong – inflicted some injury. His own acute experience made him alive to the form of injury which might affect the unavowed children and their mother. Was Mrs Grandcourt, under all her determined show of satisfaction, gnawed by a double, a treble-headed grief – self-reproach, disappointment, jealousy? He dwelt especially on all the slight signs of self-reproach: he was inclined to judge her tenderly, to excuse, to pity. He thought he had found a key now by which to interpret her more clearly: what magnifying of her misery might not a young creature get into who had wedded her fresh hopes to old secrets! He thought he saw clearly enough now why Sir Hugo had never dropped any hint of this affair to him; and immediately the image of this Mrs Glasher became painfully associated with his own hidden birth. Gwendolen knowing of that woman and her children, marrying Grandcourt, and showing herself contented, would have been among the most repulsive of beings to him; but Gwendolen tasting the bitterness of remorse for having contributed to their injury was brought very near to his fellow-feeling. If it were so, she had got to a common plane of understanding with him on some difficulties of life which a woman is rarely able to judge of with any justice or generosity; for, according to precedent, Gwendolen's view of her position might easily have been no other than that her husband's marriage with her was his entrance on the path of virtue, while Mrs Glasher represented his forsaken sin. And Deronda had naturally some resentment on behalf of the Hagars and Ishmaels.

Undeniably Deronda's growing solicitude about Gwendolen depended chiefly on her peculiar manner towards him; and I suppose neither man nor woman would be the better for an utter insensibility to such appeals. One sign that his interest in her had changed its footing was that he dismissed any caution against her being a coquette setting snares to involve him in a vulgar flirtation, and determined that he would not again evade any opportunity of talking with her. He had shaken off Mr Vandernoodt, and got into a solitary corner in the twilight; but half an hour was long enough to think of those possibilities in Gwendolen's position and state of mind; and on forming the determination not to avoid her, he remembered that she was likely to be at tea with the other ladies in the drawing-room. The conjecture was true; for Gwendolen, after resolving not to go down again for the next four hours, began to feel, at the end of one, that in shutting herself up she missed all chances of seeing and hearing, and that her visit would only last two days more. She adjusted herself, put on her little air of self-possession, and going down, made herself resolutely agreeable. Only ladies were assembled, and Lady Pentreath was amusing them with a description of a drawing-room under the Regency, and the figure that was cut by ladies and gentlemen in 1819, the year she was presented – when Deronda entered.

'Shall I be acceptable?' he said. 'Perhaps I had better go back and look for the others. I suppose they are in the billiard-room.'

'No, no; stay where you are,' said Lady Pentreath. 'They were all getting tired of me; let us hear what *you* have to say.'

'That is rather an embarrassing appeal,' said Deronda, drawing up a chair near Lady Mallinger's elbow at the tea-table. 'I think I had better take the opportunity of mentioning our songstress,' he added, looking at Lady Mallinger, – 'unless you have done so.'

'Oh, the little Jewess!' said Lady Mallinger. 'No, I have not mentioned her. It never entered my head that

any one here wanted singing lessons.'

'All ladies know some one else who wants singing lessons,' said Deronda. 'I have happened to find an exquisite singer;' – here he turned to Lady Pentreath. 'She is living with some ladies who are friends of mine – the mother and sisters of a man who was my chum at Cambridge. She was on the stage at Vienna; but she wants to leave that life, and maintain herself by teaching.'

'There are swarms of those people, aren't there?' said the old lady. 'Are her lessons to be very cheap or very expensive? Those are the two baits I know of.'

'There is another bait for those who hear her,' said Deronda. 'Her singing is something quite exceptional, I think. She has had such first-rate teaching – or rather first-rate instinct with her teaching – that you might imagine her singing all came by nature.'

'Why did she leave the stage, then?' said Lady Pentreath. 'I'm too old to believe in first-rate people giving up first-rate chances.'

'Her voice was too weak. It is a delicious voice for a room. You who put up with my singing of Schubert would be enchanted with hers,' said Deronda, looking at Mrs Raymond. 'And I imagine she would not object to sing at private parties or concerts. Her voice is quite equal to that.'

'I am to have her in my drawing-room when we go up to town,' said Lady Mallinger. 'You shall hear her then. I have not heard her myself yet; but I trust Daniel's recommendation. I mean my girls to have lessons of her.'

'Is it a charitable affair?' said Lady Pentreath. 'I can't bear charitable music.'

Lady Mallinger, who was rather helpless in conversation, and felt herself under an engagement not to tell anything of Mirah's story, had an embarrassed smile on her face, and glanced at Deronda.

'It is a charity to those who want to have a good model of feminine singing,' said Deronda. 'I think everybody who has ears would benefit by a little improvement on the ordinary style. If you heard Miss Lapidoth' – here he looked at Gwendolen – 'perhaps you would revoke your resolution to give up singing.'

'I should rather think my resolution would be confirmed,' said Gwendolen. 'I don't feel able to follow your advice of enjoying my own middlingness.'

'For my part,' said Deronda, 'people who do anything finely always inspirit me to try. I don't mean that they make me believe I can do it as well. But they make the thing, whatever it may be, seem worthy to be done. I can bear to think my own music not good for much, but the world would be more dismal if I thought music itself not good for much. Excellence encourages one about life generally; it shows the spiritual wealth of the world.'

'But then if we can't imitate it? – it only makes our own life seem the tamer,' said Gwendolen, in a mood to resent encouragement founded on her own insignificance.

'That depends on the point of view, I think,' said Deronda. 'We should have a poor life of it if we were reduced for all our pleasure to our own performances. A little private imitation of what is good is a sort of private devotion to it, and most of us ought to practise art only in the light of private study – preparation to understand and enjoy what the few can do for us. I think Miss Lapidoth is one of the few.'

'She must be a very happy person, don't you think?' said Gwendolen, with a touch of sarcasm, and a turn of her neck towards Mrs Raymond.

'I don't know,' answered the independent lady; 'I must hear more of her before I said that.'

'It may have been a bitter disappointment to her that her voice failed her for the stage,' said Juliet Fenn, sympathetically.

'I suppose she's past her best, though,' said the deep voice of Lady Pentreath.

'On the contrary, she has not reached it,' said Deronda. 'She is barely twenty.'

'And very pretty,' interposed Lady Mallinger, with an amiable wish to help Deronda. 'And she has very good manners. I'm sorry she is a bigoted Jewess; I should not like it for anything else, but it doesn't matter in singing.'

'Well, since her voice is too weak for her to scream much, I'll tell Lady Clementina to set her on my nine granddaughters,' said Lady Pentreath; 'and I hope she'll convince eight of them that they have not voice enough to sing anywhere but at church. My notion is, that many of our girls nowadays want lessons not to sing.'

'I have had my lessons in that,' said Gwendolen, looking at Deronda. 'You see Lady Pentreath is on my side.'

While she was speaking, Sir Hugo entered with some of the other gentlemen, including Grandcourt, and standing against the group at the low tea-table said –

'What imposition is Deronda putting on you ladies – slipping in among you by himself?'

'Wanting to pass off an obscurity on us as better than any celebrity,' said Lady Pentreath – 'a pretty singing Jewess who is to astonish these young people. You and I, who heard Catalani in her prime, are not so easily astonished.'

Sir Hugo listened with his good-humoured smile as he took a cup of tea from his wife, and then said, 'Well, you know, a Liberal is bound to think that there have been singers since Catalani's time.'

'Ah, you are younger than I am. I daresay you are one of the men who ran after Alcharisi. But she married off and left you all in the lurch.'

'Yes, yes; it's rather too bad when these great singers marry themselves into silence before they have a crack in their voices. And the husband is a public robber. I remember Leroux saying, "A man might as well take down a fine peal of church bells and carry them off to the steppes," ' said Sir Hugo, setting down his cup and turning away, while Deronda, who had moved from his place to make room for others, and felt that he was not in request, sat down a little apart. Presently he became aware that, in the general dispersion of the group, Gwendolen had extricated herself from the attentions of Mr Vandernoodt and had walked to the piano, where she stood apparently examining the music which lay on the desk. Will any one be surprised at Deronda's concluding that she wished him to join her? Perhaps she wanted to make amends for the unpleasant tone of resistance with which she had met his recommendation of Mirah, for he had noticed that her first impulse often was to say what she afterwards wished to retract. He went to her side and said –

'Are you relenting about the music and looking for something to play or sing?'

'I am not looking for anything, but I *am* relenting,' said Gwendolen, speaking in a submissive tone.

'May I know the reason?'

'I should like to hear Miss Lapidoth and have lessons from her, since you admire her so much – that is, of course, when we go to town. I mean lessons in rejoicing at her excellence and my own deficiency,' said Gwendolen, turning on him a sweet open smile.

'I shall be really glad for you to see and hear her,' said Deronda, returning the smile in kind.

'Is she as perfect in everything else as in her music?'

'I can't vouch for that exactly. I have not seen enough of her. But I have seen nothing in her that I could wish to be different. She has had an unhappy life. Her troubles began in early childhood, and she has grown up among very painful surroundings. But I think you will say that no advantages could have given her more grace and truer refinement.'

'I wonder what sort of troubles hers were?'

'I have not any very precise knowledge. But I know that she was on the brink of drowning herself in despair.'

'And what hindered her?' said Gwendolen, quickly, looking at Deronda.

'Some ray or other came – which made her feel that she ought to live – that it was good to live,' he answered, quietly. 'She is full of piety, and seems capable of submitting to anything when it takes the form of duty.'

'Those people are not to be pitied,' said Gwendolen, impatiently. 'I have no sympathy with women who are always doing right. I don't believe in their great sufferings.' Her fingers moved quickly among the edges of the music.

'It is true,' said Deronda, 'that the consciousness of having done wrong is something deeper, more bitter. I suppose we faulty creatures can never feel so much for the irreproachable as for those who are bruised in the struggle with their own faults. It is a very ancient story, that of the lost sheep – but it comes up afresh every day.'

'That is a way of speaking – it is not acted on, it is not real,' said Gwendolen, bitterly. 'You admire Miss Lapidoth because you think her blameless, perfect. And you know you would despise a woman who had done something you thought very wrong.'

'That would depend entirely on her own view of what she had done,' said Deronda.

'You would be satisfied if she were very wretched, I suppose?' said Gwendolen, impetuously.

'No, not satisfied – full of sorrow for her. It was not a mere way of speaking. I did not mean to say that the finer nature is not more adorable; I meant that those who would be comparatively uninteresting beforehand may become worthier of sympathy when they do something that awakens in them a keen remorse. Lives are enlarged in different ways. I daresay some would never get their eyes opened if it were not for a violent shock from the consequences of their own actions. And when they are suffering in that way one must care for them more than for the comfortably self-satisfied.' Deronda forgot everything but his vision of what Gwendolen's experience had probably been, and urged by compassion let his eyes and voice express as much interest as they would.

Gwendolen had slipped on to the music-stool, and looked up at him with pain in her long eyes, like a wounded animal asking help.

'Are you persuading Mrs Grandcourt to play to us, Dan?' said Sir Hugo, coming up and putting his hand on Deronda's shoulder with a gentle admonitory pinch.

'I cannot persuade myself,' said Gwendolen, rising.

Others had followed Sir Hugo's lead, and there was an end of any liability to confidences for that day. But the next was New Year's Eve; and a grand dance, to which the chief tenants were invited, was to be held in the picture-gallery above the cloister – the sort of entertainment in which numbers and general movement may create privacy. When Gwendolen was dressing, she longed, in remembrance of Leubronn, to put on the old turquoise necklace for her sole ornament; but she dared not offend her husband by appearing in that shabby way on an occasion when he would demand her utmost splendour. Determined to wear the memorial necklace somehow, she wound it thrice round her wrist and made a bracelet of it – having gone to her room to put it on just before the time of entering the ball-room.

It was always a beautiful scene, this dance on New Year's Eve, which had been kept up by family tradition as nearly in the old fashion as inexorable change would allow. Red carpet was laid down for the occasion; hothouse plants and evergreens were arranged in bowers at the extremities and in every recess of the gallery; and the old portraits stretching back through generations even to the pre-portraying period, made a piquant line of spectators. Some neighbouring gentry, major and minor, were invited; and it was certainly an occasion when a prospective master and mistress of Abbot's and King's Topping might see their future glory in an agreeable light, as a picturesque provincial supremacy with a rent-roll personified by the most prosperous-looking tenants. Sir Hugo expected Grandcourt to feel flattered by being asked to the Abbey at a time which included this festival in honour of the family estate; but he also hoped that his own hale appearance might impress his successor with the probable length of time that would elapse before the succession came, and with the wisdom of preferring a good actual sum to a minor property that must be waited for. All present, down to the least important farmer's daughter, knew that they were to see 'young Grandcourt,' Sir Hugo's nephew, the presumptive heir and future baronet, now visiting the Abbey with his bride after an absence of many years; any coolness between uncle and nephew having, it was understood, given way to a friendly warmth. The bride opening the ball with Sir Hugo was necessarily the cynosure of all eyes; and less than a year before, if some magic mirror could have shown Gwendolen her actual position, she would have imagined herself moving in it with a glow of triumphant pleasure, conscious that she held in her hands a life full of favourable chances which her cleverness and spirit would enable her to make the best of. And now she was wondering that she could get so little joy out of the exaltation to which she had been suddenly lifted, away from the distasteful petty empire of her girlhood with its irksome lack of distinction and superfluity of sisters. She would have been glad to be even unreasonably elated, and to forget everything but the flattery of the moment; but she was like one courting sleep, in whom thoughts insist like wilful tormentors.

Wondering in this way at her own dulness, and all the while longing for an excitement that would deaden importunate aches, she was passing through files of admiring beholders in the country-dance with which it was traditional to open the ball, and was being generally regarded by her own sex as an enviable woman. It was remarked that she carried herself with a wonderful air, considering that she had been nobody in particular, and without a farthing to her fortune. If she had been a duke's daughter, or one of the royal princesses, she could not have taken the honours of the evening more as a matter of course. Poor Gwendolen! It would by-and-by become a sort of skill in which she was automatically practised, to bear this last great gambling loss with an air of perfect self-possession.

The next couple that passed were also worth looking at. Lady Pentreath had said, 'I shall stand up for one dance, but I shall choose my partner. Mr Deronda, you are the youngest man; I mean to dance with you. Nobody is old enough to make a good pair with me. I must have a contrast.' And the contrast certainly set off the old lady to the utmost. She was one of those women who are never handsome till they are old, and she had had the wisdom to embrace the beauty of age as early as possible. What might have seemed harshness in her features when she was young, had turned now into a satisfactory strength of form and expression which defied wrinkles, and was set off by a crown of white hair; her well-built figure was well covered with black drapery, her ears and neck comfortably caressed with lace, showing none of those withered spaces which one would think it a pitiable condition of poverty to expose. She glided along gracefully enough, her dark eyes still with a mischievous smile in them as she observed the company. Her partner's young richness of tint against the flattened hues and rougher forms of her aged head had an effect something like that of a fine flower against a lichenous branch. Perhaps the tenants hardly appreciated this pair. Lady Pentreath was nothing more than a straight, active old lady: Mr Deronda was a familiar figure regarded with friendliness; but if he had been the heir, it would have been regretted that his face was not as unmistakeably English as Sir Hugo's.

Grandcourt's appearance when he came up with Lady Mallinger was not impeached with foreignness: still the satisfaction in it was not complete. It would have been matter of congratulation if one who had the luck to inherit two old family estates had had more hair, a fresher colour, and a look of greater animation; but that fine families dwindled off into females, and estates ran together into the single heirship of a mealy-complexioned male, was a tendency in things which seemed to be accounted for by a citation of other instances. It was agreed that Mr Grandcourt could never be taken for anything but what he was – a born

gentleman; and that, in fact, he looked like an heir. Perhaps the person least complacently disposed towards him at that moment was Lady Mallinger, to whom going in procession up this country-dance with Grandcourt was a blazonment of herself as the infelicitous wife who had produced nothing but daughters, little better than no children, poor dear things, except for her own fondness and for Sir Hugo's wonderful goodness to them. But such inward discomfort could not prevent the gentle lady from looking fair and stout to admiration, or her full blue eyes from glancing mildly at her neighbours. All the mothers and fathers held it a thousand pities that she had not had a fine boy, or even several – which might have been expected, to look at her when she was first married.

The gallery included only three sides of the quadrangle, the fourth being shut off as a lobby or corridor: one side was used for dancing, and the opposite side for the supper-table, while the intermediate part was less brilliantly lit, and fitted with comfortable seats. Later in the evening Gwendolen was in one of these seats, and Grandcourt was standing near her. They were not talking to each other: she was leaning backward in her chair, and he against the wall; and Deronda, happening to observe this, went up to ask her if she had resolved not to dance any more. Having himself been doing hard duty in this way among the guests, he thought he had earned the right to sink for a little while into the background, and he had spoken little to Gwendolen since their conversation at the piano the day before. Grandcourt's presence would only make it the easier to show that pleasure in talking to her even about trivialities which would be a sign of friendliness; and he fancied that her face looked blank. A smile beamed over it as she saw him coming, and she raised herself from her leaning posture. Grandcourt had been grumbling at the *ennui* of staying so long in this stupid dance, and proposing that they should vanish: she had resisted on the ground of politeness – not without being a little frightened at the probability that he was silently angry with her. She had her reason for staying, though she had begun to despair of the opportunity for the sake of which she had put the old necklace on her wrist. But now at last Deronda had come.

'Yes; I shall not dance any more. Are you not glad?' she said, with some gaiety. 'You might have felt obliged humbly to offer yourself as a partner, and I feel sure you have danced more than you like already.'

'I will not deny that,' said Deronda, 'since you have danced as much as you like.'

'But will you take trouble for me in another way, and fetch me a glass of that fresh water?'

It was but a few steps that Deronda had to go for the water. Gwendolen was wrapped in the lightest, softest of white woollen burnouses, under which her hands were hidden. While he was gone she had drawn off her glove, which was finished with a lace ruffle, and when she put up her hand to take the glass and lifted it to her mouth, the necklace-bracelet, which in its triple winding adapted itself clumsily to her wrist, was necessarily conspicuous. Grandcourt saw it, and saw that it was attracting Deronda's notice.

'What is that hideous thing you have got on your wrist?' said the husband.

'That?' said Gwendolen, composedly, pointing to the turquoises, while she still held the glass; 'it is an old necklace that I like to wear. I lost it once, and some one found it for me.'

With that she gave the glass again to Deronda, who immediately carried it away, and on returning said, in order to banish any consciousness about the necklace –

'It is worth while for you to go and look out at one of the windows on that side. You can see the finest possible moonlight on the stone pillars and carving, and shadows waving across it in the wind.'

'I should like to see it. Will you go?' said Gwendolen, looking up at her husband.

He cast his eyes down at her, and saying, 'No, Deronda will take you,' slowly moved from his leaning attitude, and slowly walked away.

Gwendolen's face for a moment showed a fleeting vexation: she resented this show of indifference towards her. Deronda felt annoyed, chiefly for her sake; and with a quick sense that it would relieve her most to behave as if nothing peculiar had occurred, he said, 'Will you take my arm and go, while only servants are there?' He thought that he understood well her action in drawing his attention to the necklace: she wished him to infer that she had submitted her mind to rebuke – her speech and manner had from the first fluctuated towards that submission – and that she felt no lingering resentment. Her evident confidence in his interpretation of her appealed to him as a peculiar claim.

When they were walking together, Gwendolen felt as if the annoyance which had just happened had removed another film of reserve from between them, and she had more right than before to be as open as she wished. She did not speak, being filled with the sense of silent confidence, until they were in front of the window looking out on the moonlit court. A sort of bower had been made round the window, turning it into a recess. Quitting his arm, she folded her hands in her burnous, and pressed her brow against the glass. He moved slightly away, and held the lapels of his coat with his thumbs under the collar as his manner was: he had a wonderful power of standing perfectly still, and in that position reminded one sometimes of Dante's *spiriti magni con occhi tardi e gravi*.[14] (Doubtless some of these danced in their youth, doubted of their own vocation, and found their own times too modern.) He abstained from remarking on the scene before them,

fearing that any indifferent words might jar on her: already the calm light and shadow, the ancient steadfast forms, had aloofness enough from those inward troubles which he felt sure were agitating her. And he judged aright: she would have been impatient of polite conversation. The incidents of the last minute or two had receded behind former thoughts which she had imagined herself uttering to Deronda, and which now urged themselves to her lips. In a subdued voice, she said –

'Suppose I had gambled again, and lost the necklace again, what should you have thought of me?'

'Worse than I do now.'

'Then you are mistaken about me. You wanted me not to do that – not to make my gain out of another's loss in that way – and I have done a great deal worse.'

'I can imagine temptations,' said Deronda. 'Perhaps I am able to understand what you mean. At least I understand self-reproach.' In spite of preparation he was almost alarmed at Gwendolen's precipitancy of confidence towards him, in contrast with her habitual resolute concealment.

'What should you do if you were like me – feeling that you were wrong and miserable, and dreading everything to come?' It seemed that she was hurrying to make the utmost use of this opportunity to speak as she would.

'That is not to be amended by doing one thing only – but many,' said Deronda, decisively.

'What?' said Gwendolen, hastily, moving her brow from the glass and looking at him.

He looked full at her in return, with what she thought was severity. He felt that it was not a moment in which he must let himself be tender, and flinch from implying a hard opinion.

'I mean there are many thoughts and habits that may help us to bear inevitable sorrow. Multitudes have to bear it.'

She turned her brow to the window again, and said impatiently, 'You must tell me then what to think and what to do; else why did you not let me go on doing as I liked and not minding? If I had gone on gambling I might have won again, and I might have got not to care for anything else. You would not let me do that. Why shouldn't I do as I like, and not mind? Other people do.' Poor Gwendolen's speech expressed nothing very clearly except her irritation.

'I don't believe you would ever get not to mind,' said Deronda, with deep-toned decision. 'If it were true that baseness and cruelty made an escape from pain, what difference would that make to people who can't be quite base or cruel? Idiots escape some pain; but you can't be an idiot. Some may do wrong to another without remorse; but suppose one does feel remorse? I believe you could never lead an injurious life – all reckless lives are injurious, pestilential – without feeling remorse.' Deronda's unconscious fervour had gathered as he went on: he was uttering thoughts which he had used for himself in moments of painful meditation.

'Then tell me what better I can do,' said Gwendolen, insistently.

'Many things. Look on other lives besides your own. See what their troubles are, and how they are borne. Try to care about something in this vast world besides the gratification of small selfish desires. Try to care for what is best in thought and action – something that is good apart from the accidents of your own lot.'

For an instant or two Gwendolen was mute. Then, again moving her brow from the glass, she said –

'You mean that I am selfish and ignorant.'

He met her fixed look in silence before he answered firmly –

'You will not go on being selfish and ignorant.'

She did not turn away her glance or let her eyelids fall, but a change came over her face – that subtle change in nerve and muscle which will sometimes give a childlike expression even to the elderly: it is the subsidence of self-assertion.

'Shall I lead you back?' said Deronda, gently, turning and offering her his arm again. She took it silently, and in that way they came in sight of Grandcourt, who was walking slowly near their former place. Gwendolen went up to him and said, 'I am ready to go now. Mr Deronda will excuse us to Lady Mallinger.'

'Certainly,' said Deronda. 'Lord and Lady Pentreath disappeared some time ago.'

Grandcourt gave his arm in silent compliance, nodding over his shoulder to Deronda, and Gwendolen too only half turned to bow and say, 'Thanks.' The husband and wife left the gallery and paced the corridors in silence. When the door had closed on them in the boudoir, Grandcourt threw himself into a chair and said, with undertoned peremptoriness, 'Sit down.' She, already in the expectation of something unpleasant, had thrown off her burnous with nervous unconsciousness, and immediately obeyed. Turning his eyes towards her, he began –

'Oblige me in future by not showing whims like a mad woman in a play.'

'What do you mean?' said Gwendolen.

'I suppose there is some understanding between you and Deronda about that thing you have on your wrist. If you have anything to say to him, say it. But don't carry on a telegraphing which other people are supposed

not to see. It's damnably vulgar.'

'You can know all about the necklace,' said Gwendolen, her angry pride resisting the nightmare of fear.

'I don't want to know. Keep to yourself whatever you like.' Grandcourt paused between each sentence, and in each his speech seemed to become more preternaturally distinct in its inward tones. 'What I care to know, I shall know without your telling me. Only you will please to behave as becomes my wife. And not make a spectacle of yourself.'

'Do you object to my talking to Mr Deronda?'

'I don't care two straws about Deronda, or any other conceited hanger-on. You may talk to him as much as you like. He is not going to take my place. You are my wife. And you will either fill your place properly – to the world and to me – or you will go to the devil.'

'I never intended anything but to fill my place properly,' said Gwendolen, with bitterest mortification in her soul.

'You put that thing on your wrist, and hid it from me till you wanted him to see it. Only fools go into that deaf and dumb talk, and think they're secret. You will understand that you are not to compromise yourself. Behave with dignity. That's all I have to say.'

With that last word Grandcourt rose, turned his back to the fire and looked down on her. She was mute. There was no reproach that she dared to fling at him in return for these insulting admonitions, and the very reason she felt them to be insulting was that their purport went with the most absolute dictate of her pride. What she would least like to incur was the making a fool of herself and being compromised. It was futile and irrelevant to try and explain that Deronda too had only been a monitor – the strongest of all monitors. Grandcourt was contemptuous, not jealous; contemptuously certain of all the subjection he cared for. Why could she not rebel, and defy him? She longed to do it. But she might as well have tried to defy the texture of her nerves and the palpitation of her heart. Her husband had a ghostly army at his back, that could close round her wherever she might turn. She sat in her splendid attire, like a white image of helplessness, and he seemed to gratify himself with looking at her. She could not even make a passionate exclamation, or throw up her arms, as she would have done in her maiden days. The sense of his scorn kept her still.

'Shall I ring?' he said, after what seemed to her a long while. She moved her head in assent, and after ringing he went to his dressing-room.

Certain words were gnawing within her. 'The wrong you have done me will be your own curse.' As he closed the door, the bitter tears rose, and the gnawing words provoked an answer: 'Why did you put your fangs into me and not into him?' It was uttered in a whisper, as the tears came up silently. But immediately she pressed her handkerchief against her eyes, and checked her tendency to sob.

The next day, recovered from the shuddering fit of this evening scene, she determined to use the charter which Grandcourt had scornfully given her, and to talk as much as she liked with Deronda; but no opportunities occurred, and any little devices she could imagine for creating them were rejected by her pride, which was now doubly active. Not towards Deronda himself – she was curiously free from alarm lest he should think her openness wanting in dignity: it was part of his power over her that she believed him free from all misunderstanding as to the way in which she appealed to him: or rather, that he should misunderstand her had never entered into her mind. But the last morning came, and still she had never been able to take up the dropped thread of their talk, and she was without devices. She and Grandcourt were to leave at three o'clock. It was too irritating that after a walk in the grounds had been planned in Deronda's hearing, he did not present himself to join in it. Grandcourt was gone with Sir Hugo to King's Topping, to see the old manor-house; others of the gentlemen were shooting; she was condemned to go and see the decoy and the water-fowl, and everything else that she least wanted to see, with the ladies, with old Lord Pentreath and his anecdotes, with Mr Vandernoodt and his admiring manners. The irritation became too strong for her: without premeditation, she took advantage of the winding road to linger a little out of sight, and then set off back to the house, almost running when she was safe from observation. She entered by a side door, and the library was on her left hand; Deronda, she knew, was often there; why might she not turn in there as well as into any other room in the house? She had been taken there expressly to see the illuminated family tree, and other remarkable things – what more natural than that she should like to look in again? The thing most to be feared was that the room would be empty of Deronda, for the door was ajar. She pushed it gently, and looked round it. He was there, writing busily at a distant table, with his back towards the door (in fact, Sir Hugo had asked him to answer some constituents' letters which had become pressing). An enormous log-fire, with the scent of russia from the books, made the great room as warmly odorous as a private chapel in which the censers have been swinging. It seemed too daring to go in – too rude to speak and interrupt him; yet she went in on the noiseless carpet, and stood still for two or three minutes, till Deronda, having finished a letter, pushed it aside for signature, and threw himself back to consider whether there were anything else for him to do, or whether he could walk out for the chance of meeting the party which included Gwendolen, when he

heard her voice saying, ‘Mr Deronda.’

It was certainly startling. He rose hastily, turned round, and pushed away his chair with a strong expression of surprise.

‘Am I wrong to come in?’ said Gwendolen.

‘I thought you were far on your walk,’ said Deronda.

‘I turned back,’ said Gwendolen.

‘Do you not intend to go out again? I could join you now, if you would allow me.’

‘No; I want to say something, and I can’t stay long,’ said Gwendolen, speaking quickly in a subdued tone, while she walked forward and rested her arms and muff on the back of the chair he had pushed away from him. ‘I want to tell you that it is really so – I can’t help feeling remorse for having injured others. That was what I meant when I said that I had done worse than gamble again and pawn the necklace again – something more injurious, as you called it. And I can’t alter it. I am punished, but I can’t alter it. You said I could do many things. Tell me again. What should you do – what should you feel, if you were in my place?’

The hurried directness with which she spoke – the absence of all her little airs, as if she were only concerned to use the time in getting an answer that would guide her, made her appeal unspeakably touching.

Deronda said, – ‘I should feel something of what you feel – deep sorrow.’

‘But what would you try to do?’ said Gwendolen, with urgent quickness.

‘Order my life so as to make any possible amends, and keep away from doing any sort of injury again,’ said Deronda, catching her sense that the time for speech was brief.

‘But I can’t – I can’t; I must go on,’ said Gwendolen, in a passionate loud whisper. ‘I have thrust out others – I have made my gain out of their loss – tried to make it – tried. And I must go on. I can’t alter it.’

It was impossible to answer this instantaneously. Her words had confirmed his conjecture, and the situation of all concerned rose in swift images before him. His feeling for those who had been ‘thrust out’ sanctioned her remorse; he could not try to nullify it, yet his heart was full of pity for her. But as soon as he could he answered – taking up her last words –

‘That is the bitterest of all – to wear the yoke of our own wrong-doing. But if you submitted to that, as men submit to maiming or a lifelong incurable disease? – and made the unalterable wrong a reason for more effort towards a good that may do something to counterbalance the evil? One who has committed irremediable errors may be scourged by that consciousness into a higher course than is common. There are many examples. Feeling what it is to have spoiled one life may well make us long to save other lives from being spoiled.’

‘But you have not wronged any one, or spoiled their lives,’ said Gwendolen, hastily. ‘It is only others who have wronged *you*.’

Deronda coloured slightly, but said immediately – ‘I suppose our keen feeling for ourselves might end in giving us a keen feeling for others, if, when we are suffering acutely, we were to consider that others go through the same sharp experience. That is a sort of remorse before commission. Can’t you understand that?’

‘I think I do – now,’ said Gwendolen. ‘But you were right – I *am* selfish. I have never thought much of any one’s feelings, except my mother’s. I have not been fond of people. – But what can I do?’ she went on, more quickly. ‘I must get up in the morning and do what every one else does. It is all like a dance set beforehand. I seem to see all that can be – and I am tired and sick of it. And the world is all confusion to me’ – she made a gesture of disgust. ‘You say I am ignorant. But what is the good of trying to know more, unless life were worth more?’

‘This good,’ said Deronda, promptly, with a touch of indignant severity, which he was inclined to encourage as his own safeguard; ‘life *would* be worth more to you: some real knowledge would give you an interest in the world beyond the small drama of personal desires. It is the curse of your life – forgive me – of so many lives, that all passion is spent in that narrow round, for want of ideas and sympathies to make a larger home for it. Is there any single occupation of mind that you care about with passionate delight or even independent interest?’

Deronda paused, but Gwendolen, looking startled and thrilled as by an electric shock, said nothing, and he went on more insistently –

‘I take what you said of music for a small example – it answers for all larger things – you will not cultivate it for the sake of a private joy in it. What sort of earth or heaven would hold any spiritual wealth in it for souls pauperised by inaction? If one firmament has no stimulus for our attention and awe, I don’t see how four would have it. We should stamp every possible world with the flatness of our own inanity – which is necessarily impious, without faith or fellowship. The refuge you are needing from personal trouble is the higher, the religious life, which holds an enthusiasm for something more than our own appetites and vanities. The few may find themselves in it simply by an elevation of feeling; but for us who have to struggle for our wisdom, the higher life must be a region in which the affections are clad with knowledge.’

The half-indignant remonstrance that vibrated in Deronda’s voice came, as often happens, from the habit of

inward argument with himself rather than from severity towards Gwendolen; but it had a more beneficent effect on her than any soothings. Nothing is feebler than the indolent rebellion of complaint; and to be roused into self-judgment is comparative activity. For the moment she felt like a shaken child – shaken out of its wailings into awe, and she said humbly –

'I will try. I will think.'

They both stood silent for a minute, as if some third presence had arrested them, – for Deronda, too, was under that sense of pressure which is apt to come when our own winged words seem to be hovering around us, – till Gwendolen began again –

'You said affection was the best thing, and I have hardly any – none about me. If I could, I would have mamma; but that is impossible. Things have changed to me so – in such a short time. What I used not to like, I long for now. I think I am almost getting fond of the old things now they are gone.' Her lip trembled.

'Take the present suffering as a painful letting in of light,' said Deronda, more gently. 'You are conscious of more beyond the round of your own inclinations – you know more of the way in which your life presses on others, and their life on yours. I don't think you could have escaped the painful process in some form or other.'

'But it is a very cruel form,' said Gwendolen, beating her foot on the ground with returning agitation. 'I am frightened at everything. I am frightened at myself. When my blood is fired I can do daring things – take any leap; but that makes me frightened at myself.' She was looking at nothing outside her; but her eyes were directed toward the window, away from Deronda, who, with quick comprehension, said –

'Turn your fear into a safeguard. Keep your dread fixed on the idea of increasing that remorse which is so bitter to you. Fixed meditation may do a great deal towards defining our longing or dread. We are not always in a state of strong emotion, and when we are calm we can use our memories and gradually change the bias of our fear, as we do our tastes. Take your fear as a safeguard. It is like quickness of hearing. It may make consequences passionately present to you. Try to take hold of your sensibility, and use it as if it were a faculty, like vision.' Deronda uttered each sentence more urgently; he felt as if he were seizing a faint chance of rescuing her from some indefinite danger.

'Yes, I know; I understand what you mean,' said Gwendolen, in her loud whisper, not turning her eyes, but lifting up her small gloved hand and waving it in deprecation of the notion that it was easy to obey that advice. 'But if feelings rose – there are some feelings – hatred and anger – how can I be good when they keep rising? And if there came a moment when I felt stifled and could bear it no longer—' She broke off, and with agitated lips looked at Deronda, but the expression on his face pierced her with an entirely new feeling. He was under the baffling difficulty of discerning, that what he had been urging on her was thrown into the pallid distance of mere thought before the outburst of her habitual emotion. It was as if he saw her drowning while his limbs were bound. The pained compassion which was spread over his features as he watched her, affected her with a compunction unlike any she had felt before, and in a changed imploring tone she said –

'I am grieving you. I am ungrateful. You *can* help me. I will think of everything. I will try. Tell me – it will not be a pain to you that I have dared to speak of my trouble to you? You began it, you know, when you rebuked me.' There was a melancholy smile on her lips as she said that, but she added more entreatingly, 'It will not be a pain to you?'

'Not if it does anything to save you from an evil to come,' said Deronda, with strong emphasis; 'otherwise, it will be a lasting pain.'

'No – no – it shall not be. It may be – it shall be better with me because I have known you.' She turned immediately, and quitted the room.

When she was on the first landing of the staircase, Sir Hugo passed across the hall on his way to the library, and saw her. Grandcourt was not with him.

Deronda, when the baronet entered, was standing in his ordinary attitude, grasping his coat-collar, with his back to the table, and with that indefinable expression by which we judge that a man is still in the shadow of a scene which he has just gone through. He moved, however, and began to arrange the letters.

'Has Mrs Grandcourt been in here?' said Sir Hugo.

'Yes, she has.'

'Where are the others?'

'I believe she left them somewhere in the grounds.'

After a moment's silence, in which Sir Hugo looked at a letter without reading it, he said, 'I hope you are not playing with fire, Dan – you understand me?'

'I believe I do, sir,' said Deronda, after a slight hesitation, which had some repressed anger in it. 'But there is nothing answering to your metaphor – no fire, and therefore no chance of scorching.'

Sir Hugo looked searchingly at him, and then said, 'So much the better. For between ourselves, I fancy there may be some hidden gunpowder in that establishment.'

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Aspern. Pardon, my lord – I speak for Sigismund.

Fronsberg. For him? Oh, ay – for him I always hold
A pardon safe in bank, sure he will draw
Sooner or later on me. What his need?
Mad project broken? fine mechanic wings
That would not fly? durance, assault on watch,
Bill for Epernay, not a crust to eat?

Aspern. Oh, none of these, my lord; he has escaped
From Circe's herd, and seeks to win the love
Of your fair ward Cecilia: but would win
First your consent. You frown.

Fronsberg. Distinguish words.
I said I held a pardon, not consent.

In spite of Deronda's reasons for wishing to be in town again – reasons in which his anxiety for Mirah was blent with curiosity to know more of the enigmatic Mordecai – he did not manage to go up before Sir Hugo, who preceded his family that he might be ready for the opening of Parliament on the 6th of February. Deronda took up his quarters in Park Lane, aware that his chambers were sufficiently tenanted by Hans Meyrick. This was what he expected; but he found other things not altogether according to his expectations.

Most of us remember Retzsch's drawing of destiny in the shape of Mephistopheles playing at chess with man for his soul, a game in which we may imagine the clever adversary making a feint of unintended moves so as to set the beguiled mortal on carrying his defensive pieces away from the true point of attack. The fiend makes preparation his favourite object of mockery, that he may fatally persuade us against our best safeguard: he even meddles so far as to suggest our taking out waterproofs when he is well aware the sky is going to clear, foreseeing that the imbecile will turn this delusion into a prejudice against waterproofs instead of giving a closer study to the weather-signs. It is a peculiar test of a man's metal when, after he has painfully adjusted himself to what seems a wise provision, he finds all his mental precaution a little beside the mark, and his excellent intentions no better than miscalculated dovetails, accurately cut from a wrong starting-point. His magnanimity has got itself ready to meet misbehaviour, and finds quite a different call upon it. Something of this kind happened to Deronda.

His first impression was one of pure pleasure and amusement at finding his sitting-room transformed into an *atelier* strewed with miscellaneous drawings and with the contents of two chests from Rome, the lower half of the windows darkened with baize, and the blond Hans in his weird youth as the presiding genius of the littered place – his hair longer than of old, his face more whimsically creased, and his high voice as usual getting higher under the excitement of rapid talk. The friendship of the two had been kept up warmly since the memorable Cambridge time, not only by correspondence but by little episodes of companionship abroad and in England, and the original relation of confidence on one side and indulgence on the other had been developed in practice, as is wont to be the case where such spiritual borrowing and lending has been well begun.

'I knew you would like to see my casts and antiquities,' said Hans, after the first hearty greetings and inquiries, 'so I didn't scruple to unlade my chests here. But I've found two rooms at Chelsea not many hundred yards from my mother and sisters, and I shall soon be ready to hang out there – when they've scraped the walls and put in some new lights. That's all I'm waiting for. But you see I don't wait to begin work: you can't conceive what a great fellow I'm going to be. The seed of immortality has sprouted within me.'

'Only a fungoid growth, I daresay – a crowing disease in the lungs,' said Deronda, accustomed to treat Hans in brotherly fashion. He was walking towards some drawings propped on the ledge of his bookcases; five rapidly-sketched heads – different aspects of the same face. He stood at a convenient distance from them, without making any remark. Hans, too, was silent for a minute, took up his palette and began touching the picture on his easel.

'What do you think of them?' he said at last.

'The full face looks too massive; otherwise the likenesses are good,' said Deronda, more coldly than was usual with him.

‘No, it is not too massive,’ said Hans, decisively. ‘I have noted that. There is always a little surprise when one passes from the profile to the full face. But I shall enlarge her scale for Berenice. I am making a Berenice series – look at the sketches along there – and now I think of it, you are just the model I want for the Agrippa.’ Hans, still with pencil and palette in hand, had moved to Deronda’s side while he said this, but he added hastily, as if conscious of a mistake, ‘No, no, I forgot; you don’t like sitting for your portrait, confound you! However, I’ve picked up a capital Titus. There are to be five in the series. The first is Berenice clasping the knees of Gessius Florus and beseeching him to spare her people; I’ve got that on the easel. Then this, where she is standing on the Xystus with Agrippa, entreating the people not to injure themselves by resistance.’

‘Agrippa’s legs will never do,’ said Deronda.

‘The legs are good realistically,’ said Hans, his face creasing drolly; ‘public men are often shaky about the legs – “Their legs, the emblem of their various thought,” as somebody says in the “Rehearsal.” ’

‘But these are as impossible as the legs of Raphael’s Alcibiades,’ said Deronda.

‘Then they are good ideally,’ said Hans. ‘Agrippa’s legs were possibly bad; I idealise that and make them impossibly bad. Art, my Eugenius, must intensify. But never mind the legs now: the third sketch in the series is Berenice exulting in the prospect of being Empress of Rome, when the news has come that Vespasian is declared Emperor and her lover Titus his successor.’

‘You must put a scroll in her mouth, else people will not understand that. You can’t tell that in a picture.’

‘It will make them feel their ignorance then – an excellent aesthetic effect. The fourth is, Titus sending Berenice away from Rome after she has shared his palace for ten years – both reluctant, both sad – *invitus invitam,* as Suetonius hath it. I’ve found a model for the Roman brute.’

‘Shall you make Berenice look fifty? She must have been that.’

‘No, no; a few mature touches to show the lapse of time. Dark-eyed beauty wears well, hers particularly. But now, here is the fifth: Berenice seated lonely on the ruins of Jerusalem. That is pure imagination. That is what ought to have been – perhaps was. Now, see how I tell a pathetic negative. Nobody knows what became of her: – that is finely indicated by the series coming to a close. There is no sixth picture.’ Here Hans pretended to speak with a gasping sense of sublimity, and drew back his head with a frown, as if looking for a like impression on Deronda. ‘I break off in the Homeric style. The story is chipped off, so to speak, and passes with a ragged edge into nothing – *le néant*; can anything be more sublime, especially in French? The vulgar would desire to see her corpse and burial – perhaps her will read and her linen distributed. But now come and look at this on the easel. I have made some way there.’

‘That beseeching attitude is really good,’ said Deronda, after a moment’s contemplation. ‘You have been very industrious in the Christmas holidays; for I suppose you have taken up the subject since you came to London.’ Neither of them had yet mentioned Mirah.

‘No,’ said Hans, putting touches to his picture, ‘I made up my mind to the subject before. I take that lucky chance for an augury that I am going to burst on the world as a great painter. I saw a splendid woman in the Trastevere – the grandest women there are half Jewesses – and she set me hunting for a fine situation of a Jewess at Rome. Like other men of vast learning, I ended by taking what lay on the surface. I’ll show you a sketch of the Trasteverina’s head when I can lay my hands on it.’

‘I should think she would be a more suitable model for Berenice,’ said Deronda, not knowing exactly how to express his discontent.

‘Not a bit of it. The model ought to be the most beautiful Jewess in the world, and I have found her.’

‘Have you made yourself sure that she would like to figure in that character? I should think no woman would be more abhorrent to her. Does she quite know what you are doing?’

‘Certainly. I got her to throw herself precisely into this attitude. Little mother sat for Gessius Florus, and Mirah clasped her knees.’ – Here Hans went a little way off and looked at the effect of his touches.

‘I daresay she knows nothing about Berenice’s history,’ said Deronda, feeling more indignation than he would have been able to justify.

‘Oh yes, she does – ladies’ edition. Berenice was a fervid patriot, but was beguiled by love and ambition into attaching herself to the arch-enemy of her people. Whence the Nemesis. Mirah takes it as a tragic parable, and cries to think what the penitent Berenice suffered as she wandered back to Jerusalem and sat desolate amidst desolation. That was her own phrase. I couldn’t find in my heart to tell her I invented that part of the story.’

‘Show me your Trasteverina,’ said Deronda, chiefly in order to hinder himself from saying something else.

‘Shall you mind turning over that folio?’ said Hans. ‘My studies of heads are all there. But they are in confusion. You will perhaps find her next to a crop-eared undergraduate.’

After Deronda had been turning over the drawings a minute or two, he said –

‘These seem to be all Cambridge heads and bits of country. Perhaps I had better begin at the other end.’

‘No; you’ll find her about the middle. I emptied one folio into another.’

‘Is this one of your undergraduates?’ said Deronda, holding up a drawing. ‘It’s an unusually agreeable face.’

‘That? Oh, that’s a man named Gascoigne – Rex Gascoigne. An uncommonly good fellow; his upper lip, too, is good. I coached him before he got his scholarship. He ought to have taken honours last Easter. But he was ill, and has had to stay up another year. I must look him up. I want to know how he’s going on.’

‘Here she is, I suppose,’ said Deronda, holding up the sketch of the Trasteverina.

‘Ah,’ said Hans, looking at it rather contemptuously, ‘too coarse. I was unregenerate then.’

Deronda was silent while he closed the folio, leaving the Trasteverina outside. Then grasping his coat-collar, and turning towards Hans, he said, ‘I daresay my scruples are excessive, Meyrick, but I must ask you to oblige me by giving up this notion.’

Hans threw himself into a tragic attitude, and screamed, ‘What! my series – my immortal Berenice series? Think of what you are saying, man – destroying, as Milton says, not a life but an immortality. Wait before you answer, that I may deposit the implements of my art and be ready to uproot my hair.’

Here Hans laid down his pencil and palette, threw himself backward into a great chair, and hanging limply over the side, shook his long hair half over his face, lifted his hooked fingers on each side his head, and looked up with comic terror at Deronda, who was obliged to smile as he said –

‘Paint as many Berenices as you like, but I wish you could feel with me – perhaps you will, on reflection – that you should choose another model.’

‘Why?’ said Hans, standing up, and looking serious again.

‘Because she may get into such a position that her face is likely to be recognised. Mrs Meyrick and I are anxious for her that she should be known as an admirable singer. It is right, and she wishes it, that she should make herself independent. And she has excellent chances. One good introduction is secured already. And I am going to speak to Klesmer. Her face may come to be very well known, and – well, it is useless to attempt to explain, unless you feel as I do. I believe that if Mirah saw the circumstances clearly, she would strongly object to being exhibited in this way – to allowing herself to be used as a model for a heroine of this sort.’

As Hans stood with his thumbs in the belt of his blouse listening to this speech, his face showed a growing surprise melting into amusement, that at last would have its way in an explosive laugh: but seeing that Deronda looked gravely offended, he checked himself to say, ‘Excuse my laughing, Deronda. You never gave me an advantage over you before. If it had been about anything but my own pictures, I should have swallowed every word because you said it. And so you actually believe that I should get my five pictures hung on the line in a conspicuous position, and carefully studied by the public? Zounds, man! cider-cup and conceit never gave me half such a beautiful dream. My pictures are likely to remain as private as the utmost hypersensitiveness could desire.’

Hans turned to paint again as a way of filling up awkward pauses. Deronda stood perfectly still, recognising his mistakes as to publicity, but also conscious that his repugnance was not much diminished. He was the reverse of satisfied either with himself or with Hans; but the power of being quiet carries a man well through moments of embarrassment. Hans had a reverence for his friend which made him feel a sort of shyness at Deronda’s being in the wrong; but it was not in his nature to give up anything readily, though it were only a whim – or rather, especially if it were a whim, and he presently went on, painting the while –

‘But even supposing I had a public rushing after my pictures as if they were a railway series including nurses, babies, and bonnet-boxes, I can’t see any justice in your objection. Every painter worth remembering has painted the face he admired most, as often as he could. It is a part of his soul that goes out into his pictures. He diffuses its influence in that way. He puts what he hates into a caricature. He puts what he adores into some sacred, heroic form. If a man could paint the woman he loves a thousand times as the *Stella Maris* to put courage into the sailors on board a thousand ships, so much the more honour to her. Isn’t that better than painting a piece of staring immodesty and calling it by a worshipful name?’

‘Every objection can be answered if you take broad ground enough, Hans: no special question of conduct can be properly settled in that way,’ said Deronda, with a touch of peremptoriness. ‘I might admit all your generalities, and yet be right in saying you ought not to publish Mirah’s face as a model for Berenice. But I give up the question of publicity. I was unreasonable there.’ Deronda hesitated a moment. ‘Still, even as a private affair, there might be good reasons for your not indulging yourself too much in painting her from the point of view you mention. You must feel that her situation at present is a very delicate one; and until she is in more independence, she should be kept as carefully as a bit of Venetian glass, for fear of shaking her out of the safe place she is lodged in. Are you quite sure of your own discretion? Excuse me, Hans. My having found her binds me to watch over her. Do you understand me?’

‘Perfectly,’ said Hans, turning his face into a good-humoured smile. ‘You have the very justifiable opinion of me that I am likely to shatter all the glass in my way, and break my own skull into the bargain. Quite fair. Since I got into the scrape of being born, everything I have liked best has been a scrape either for myself or somebody else. Everything I have taken to heartily has somehow turned into a scrape. My painting is the last scrape; and I shall be all my life getting out of it. You think now I shall get into a scrape at home. No; I am

regenerate. You think I must be over head and ears in love with Mirah. Quite right; so I am. But you think I shall scream and plunge and spoil everything. There you are mistaken – excusably, but transcendently mistaken. I have undergone baptism by immersion. Awe takes care of me. Ask the little mother.'

'You don't reckon a hopeless love among your scrapes, then?' said Deronda, whose voice seemed to get deeper as Hans's went higher.

'I don't mean to call mine hopeless,' said Hans, with provoking coolness, laying down his tools, thrusting his thumbs into his belt, and moving away a little, as if to contemplate his picture more deliberately.

'My dear fellow, you are only preparing misery for yourself,' said Deronda, decisively. 'She would not marry a Christian, even if she loved him. Have you heard her – of course you have – heard her speak of her people and her religion?'

'That can't last,' said Hans. 'She will see no Jew who is tolerable. Every male of that race is insupportable, – "insupportably advancing" – his nose.'

'She may rejoin her family. That is what she longs for. Her mother and brother are probably strict Jews.'

'I'll turn proselyte if she wishes it,' said Hans, with a shrug and a laugh.

'Don't talk nonsense, Hans. I thought you professed a serious love for her,' said Deronda, getting heated.

'So I do. You think it desperate, but I don't.'

'I know nothing; I can't tell what has happened. We must be prepared for surprises. But I can hardly imagine a greater surprise to me than that there should have seemed to be anything in Mirah's sentiments for you to found a romantic hope on.' Deronda felt that he was too contemptuous.

'I don't found my romantic hopes on a woman's sentiments,' said Hans, perversely inclined to be the merrier when he was addressed with gravity. 'I go to science and philosophy for my romance. Nature designed Mirah to fall in love with me. The amalgamation of races demands it – the mitigation of human ugliness demands it – the affinity of contrasts assures it. I am the utmost contrast to Mirah – a bleached Christian, who can't sing two notes in tune. Who has a chance against me?'

'I see now; it was all *persiflage*. You don't mean a word of what you say, Meyrick,' said Deronda, laying his hand on Meyrick's shoulder, and speaking in a tone of cordial relief. 'I was a wiseacre to answer you seriously.'

'Upon my honour I do mean it, though,' said Hans, facing round and laying his left hand on Deronda's shoulder, so that their eyes fronted each other closely. 'I am at the confessional. I meant to tell you as soon as you came. My mother says you are Mirah's guardian, and she thinks herself responsible to you for every breath that falls on Mirah in her house. Well, I love her – I worship her – I won't despair – I mean to deserve her.'

'My dear fellow, you can't do it,' said Deronda, quickly.

'I should have said, I mean to try.'

'You can't keep your resolve, Hans. You used to resolve what you would do for your mother and sisters.'

'You have a right to reproach me, old fellow,' said Hans, gently.

'Perhaps I am ungenerous,' said Deronda, not apologetically, however. 'Yet it can't be ungenerous to warn you that you are indulging mad, Quixotic expectations.'

'Who will be hurt but myself, then?' said Hans, putting out his lip. 'I am not going to say anything to her, unless I felt sure of the answer. I dare not ask the oracles: I prefer a cheerful caliginosity, as Sir Thomas Browne might say. I would rather run my chance there and lose, than be sure of winning anywhere else. And I don't mean to swallow the poison of despair, though you are disposed to thrust it on me. I am giving up wine, so let me get a little drunk on hope and vanity.'

'With all my heart, if it will do you any good,' said Deronda, loosing Hans's shoulder, with a little push. He made his tone kindly, but his words were from the lip only. As to his real feeling he was silenced.

He was conscious of that peculiar irritation which will sometimes befall the man whom others are inclined to trust as a mentor – the irritation of perceiving that he is supposed to be entirely off the same plane of desire and temptation as those who confess to him. Our guides, we pretend, must be sinless: as if those were not often the best teachers who only yesterday got corrected for their mistakes. Throughout their friendship Deronda had been used to Hans's egotism, but he had never before felt intolerant of it: when Hans, habitually pouring out his own feelings and affairs, had never cared for any detail in return, and, if he chanced to know any, had soon forgotten it. Deronda had been inwardly as well as outwardly indulgent – nay, satisfied. But now he noted with some indignation, all the stronger because it must not be betrayed, Hans's evident assumption that for any danger of rivalry or jealousy in relation to Mirah, Deronda was as much out of the question as the angel Gabriel. It is one thing to be resolute in placing one's self out of the question, and another to endure that others should perform that exclusion for us. He had expected that Hans would give him trouble: what he had not expected was that the trouble would have a strong element of personal feeling. And he was rather ashamed that Hans's hopes caused him uneasiness in spite of his well-warranted conviction that

they would never be fulfilled. They had raised an image of Mirah changing; and however he might protest that the change would not happen, the protest kept up the unplesant image. Altogether, poor Hans seemed to be entering into Deronda's experience in a disproportionate manner – going beyond his part of rescued prodigal, and rousing a feeling quite distinct from compassionate affection.

When Deronda went to Chelsea he was not made as comfortable as he ought to have been by Mrs Meyrick's evident release from anxiety about the beloved but incalculable son. Mirah seemed livelier than before, and for the first time he saw her laugh. It was when they were talking of Hans, he being naturally the mother's first topic. Mirah wished to know if Deronda had seen Mr Hans going through a sort of character piece without changing his dress.

'He passes from one figure to another as if he were a bit of flame where you fancied the figures without seeing them,' said Mirah, full of her subject; 'he is so wonderfully quick. I used never to like comic things on the stage – they were dwelt on too long; but all in one minute Mr Hans makes himself a blind bard, and then Rienzi addressing the Romans, and then an opera-dancer, and then a desponding young gentleman – I am sorry for them all, and yet I laugh, all in one' – here Mirah gave a little laugh that might have entered into a song.

'We hardly thought that Mirah could laugh till Hans came,' said Mrs Meyrick, seeing that Deronda, like herself, was observing the pretty picture.

'Hans seems in great force just now,' said Deronda, in a tone of congratulation. 'I don't wonder at his enlivening you.'

'He's been just perfect ever since he came back,' said Mrs Meyrick, keeping to herself the next clause – 'if it will but last.'

'It is a great happiness,' said Mirah, 'to see the son and brother come into this dear home. And I hear them all talk about what they did together when they were little. That seems like heaven, to have a mother and brother who talk in that way. I have never had it.'

'Nor I,' said Deronda, involuntarily.

'No?' said Mirah, regretfully. 'I wish you had. I wish you had had every good.' The last words were uttered with a serious ardour as if they had been part of a litany, while her eyes were fixed on Deronda, who with his elbow on the back of his chair was contemplating her by the new light of the impression she had made on Hans, and the possibility of her being attracted by that extraordinary contrast. It was no more than what had happened on each former visit of his, that Mirah appeared to enjoy speaking of what she felt very much as a little girl fresh from school pours forth spontaneously all the long-repressed chat for which she has found willing ears. For the first time in her life Mirah was among those whom she entirely trusted, and her original visionary impression that Deronda was a divinely-sent messenger hung about his image still, stirring always anew the disposition to reliance and openness. It was in this way she took what might have been the injurious flattery of admiring attention into which her helpless dependence had been suddenly transformed: every one around her watched for her looks and words, and the effect on her was simply that of having passed from a stifling imprisonment into an exhilarating air which made speech and action a delight. To her mind it was all a gift from others' goodness. But that word of Deronda's implying that there had been some lack in his life which might be compared with anything she had known in hers, was an entirely new inlet of thought about him. After her first expression of sorrowful surprise she went on –

'But Mr Hans said yesterday that you thought so much of others you hardly wanted anything for yourself. He told us a wonderful story of Bouddha giving himself to the famished tigress to save her and her little ones from starving. And he said you were like Bouddha. That is what we all imagine of you.'

'Pray don't imagine that,' said Deronda, who had lately been finding such suppositions rather exasperating. 'Even if it were true that I thought so much of others, it would not follow that I had no wants for myself. When Bouddha let the tigress eat him he might have been very hungry himself.'

'Perhaps if he was starved he would not mind so much about being eaten,' said Mab, shyly.

'Please don't think that, Mab; it takes away the beauty of the action,' said Mirah.

'But if it were true, Mirah?' said the rational Amy, having a half-holiday from her teaching; 'you always take what is beautiful as if it were true.'

'So it is,' said Mirah, gently. 'If people have thought what is the most beautiful and the best thing, it must be true. It is always there.'

'Now, Mirah, what *do* you mean?' said Amy.

'I understand her,' said Deronda, coming to the rescue. 'It is a truth in thought though it may never have been carried out in action. It lives as an idea. Is that it?' He turned to Mirah, who was listening with a blind look in her lovely eyes.

'It must be that, because you understand me, but I cannot quite explain,' said Mirah, rather abstractedly – still searching for some expression.

'But *was* it beautiful for Bouddha to let the tiger eat him?' said Amy, changing her ground. 'It would be a bad pattern.'

'The world would get full of fat tigers,' said Mab.

Deronda laughed, but defended the myth. 'It is like a passionate word,' he said; 'the exaggeration is a flash of fervour. It is an extreme image of what is happening every day – the transmutation of self.'

'I think I can say what I mean, now,' said Mirah, who had not heard the intermediate talk. 'When the best thing comes into our thoughts, it is like what my mother has been to me. She has been just as really with me as all the other people about me – often more really with me.'

Deronda, inwardly wincing under this illustration, which brought other possible realities about that mother vividly before him, presently turned the conversation by saying, 'But we must not get too far away from practical matters. I came, for one thing, to tell of an interview I had yesterday, which I hope Mirah will find to have been useful to her. It was with Klesmer, the great pianist.'

'Ah?' said Mrs Meyrick, with satisfaction. 'You think he will help her?'

'I hope so. He is very much occupied, but has promised to fix a time for receiving and hearing Miss Lapidoth, as we must learn to call her' – here Deronda smiled at Mirah – 'if she consents to go to him.'

'I shall be very grateful,' said Mirah, calmly. 'He wants to hear me sing, before he can judge whether I ought to be helped.'

Deronda was struck with her plain sense about these matters of practical concern.

'It will not be at all trying to you, I hope, if Mrs Meyrick will kindly go with you to Klesmer's house.'

'Oh no, not at all trying. I have been doing that all my life – I mean, told to do things that others may judge of me. And I have gone through a bad trial of that sort. I am prepared to bear it, and do some very small thing. Is Klesmer a severe man?'

'He is peculiar, but I have not had experience enough of him to know whether he would be what you would call severe. I know he is kind-hearted – kind in action, if not in speech.'

'I have been used to be frowned at and not praised,' said Mirah.

'By the by, Klesmer frowns a good deal,' said Deronda, 'but there is often a sort of smile in his eyes all the while. Unhappily he wears spectacles, so you must catch him in the right light to see the smile.'

'I shall not be frightened,' said Mirah. 'If he were like a roaring lion, he only wants me to sing. I shall do what I can.'

'Then I feel sure you will not mind being invited to sing in Lady Mallinger's drawing-room,' said Deronda. 'She intends to ask you next month, and will invite many ladies to hear you, who are likely to want lessons from you for their daughters.'

'How fast we are mounting!' said Mrs Meyrick, with delight. 'You never thought of getting grand so quickly, Mirah.'

'I am a little frightened at being called Miss Lapidoth,' said Mirah, colouring with a new uneasiness. 'Might I be called Cohen?'

'I understand you,' said Deronda, promptly. 'But, I assure you, you must not be called Cohen. The name is inadmissible for a singer. This is one of the trifles in which we must conform to vulgar prejudice. We could choose some other name, however – such as singers ordinarily choose – an Italian or Spanish name, which would suit your *physique*.' To Deronda just now the name Cohen was equivalent to the ugliest of yellow badges.

Mirah reflected a little, anxiously, then said, 'No. If Cohen will not do, I will keep the name I have been called by. I will not hide myself. I have friends to protect me. And now – if my father were very miserable and wanted help – no,' she said, looking at Mrs Meyrick, 'I should think then, that he was perhaps crying as I used to see him, and had nobody to pity him, and I had hidden myself from him. He had none belonging to him but me. Others that made friends with him always left him.'

'Keep to what you feel right, my dear child,' said Mrs Meyrick. '*I* would not persuade you to the contrary.' For her own part she had no patience or pity for that father, and would have left him to his crying.

Deronda was saying to himself, 'I am rather base to be angry with Hans. How can he help being in love with her? But it is too absurdly presumptuous for him even to frame the idea of appropriating her, and a sort of blasphemy to suppose that she could possibly give herself to him.'

What would it be for Daniel Deronda to entertain such thoughts? He was not one who could quite naïvely introduce himself where he had just excluded his friend, yet it was undeniable that what had just happened made a new stage in his feeling towards Mirah. But apart from other grounds for self-repression, reasons both definite and vague made him shut away that question as he might have shut up a half-opened writing that would have carried his imagination too far and given too much shape to presentiments. Might there not come a disclosure which would hold the missing determination of his course? What did he really know about his origin? Strangely in these latter months when it seemed right that he should exert his will in the choice of a

destination, the passion of his nature had got more and more locked by this uncertainty. The disclosure might bring its pain, indeed the likelihood seemed to him to be all on that side; but if it helped him to make his life a sequence which would take the form of duty – if it saved him from having to make an arbitrary selection where he felt no preponderance of desire? Still more he wanted to escape standing as a critic outside the activities of men, stiffened into the ridiculous attitude of self-assigned superiority. His chief tether was his early inwrought affection for Sir Hugo, making him gratefully deferential to wishes with which he had little agreement; but gratitude had been sometimes disturbed by doubts which were near reducing it to a fear of being ungrateful. Many of us complain that half our birthright is sharp duty: Deronda was more inclined to complain that he was robbed of this half; yet he accused himself, as he would have accused another, of being weakly self-conscious and wanting in resolve. He was the reverse of that type painted for us in Faulconbridge and Edmund of Gloster, whose coarse ambition for personal success is inflamed by a defiance of accidental disadvantages. To Deniel the words Father and Mother had the altar-fire in them; and the thought of all closest relations of our nature held still something of the mystic power which had made his neck and ears burn in boyhood. The average man may regard this sensibility on the question of birth as preposterous and hardly credible; but with the utmost respect for his knowledge as the rock from which all other knowledge is hewn, it must be admitted that many well-proved facts are dark to the average man, even concerning the action of his own heart and the structure of his own retina. A century ago he and all his forefathers had not had the slightest notion of that electric discharge by means of which they had all wagged their tongues mistakenly; any more than they were awake to the secluded anguish of exceptional sensitiveness into which many a carelessly-begotten child of man is born.

Perhaps the ferment was all the stronger in Deronda's mind because he had never had a confidant to whom he could open himself on these delicate subjects. He had always been leaned on instead of being invited to lean. Sometimes he had longed for the sort of friend to whom he might possibly unfold his experience: a young man like himself who sustained a private grief and was not too confident about his own career; speculative enough to understand every moral difficulty, yet socially susceptible, as he himself was, and having every outward sign of equality either in bodily or spiritual wrestling; – for he had found it impossible to reciprocate confidences with one who looked up to him. But he had no expectation of meeting the friend he imagined. Deronda's was not one of those quiveringly-poised natures that lend themselves to second-sight.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

> There be who hold that the deeper tragedy were a Prometheus Bound not *after* but *before* he had well got the celestial fire into the νάρθηξ whereby it might be conveyed to mortals: thrust by the Kratos and Bia of instituted methods into a solitude of despised ideas, fastened in throbbing helplessness by the fatal pressure of poverty and disease – a solitude where many pass by, but none regard.

'Second-sight' is a flag over disputed ground. But it is matter of knowledge that there are persons whose yearnings, conceptions – nay, travelled conclusions – continually take the form of images which have a foreshadowing power: the deed they would do starts up before them in complete shape, making a coercive type; the event they hunger for or dread rises into vision with a seed-like growth, feeding itself fast on unnumbered impressions. They are not always the less capable of the argumentative process, nor less sane than the commonplace calculators of the market: sometimes it may be that their natures have manifold openings, like the hundred-gated Thebes, where there may naturally be a greater and more miscellaneous inrush than through a narrow beadle-watched portal. No doubt there are abject specimens of the visionary, as there is a minim mammal which you might imprison in the finger of your glove. That small relative of the elephant has no harm in him; but what great mental or social type is free from specimens whose insignificance is both ugly and noxious? One is afraid to think of all that the genus 'patriot' embraces; or of the elbowing there might be at the day of judgment for those who ranked as authors, and brought volumes either in their hands or on trucks.

This apology for inevitable kinship is meant to usher in some facts about Mordecai, whose figure had bitten itself into Deronda's mind as a new question which he felt an interest in getting answered. But the interest was no more than a vaguely-expectant suspense: the consumptive-looking Jew, apparently a fervid student of some kind, getting his crust by a quiet handicraft, like Spinoza, fitted into none of Deronda's anticipations.

It was otherwise with the effect of their meeting on Mordecai. For many winters, while he had been conscious of an ebbing physical life, and a widening spiritual loneliness, all his passionate desire had concentred itself in the yearning for some young ear into which he could pour his mind as a testament, some soul kindred enough to accept the spiritual product of his own brief, painful life, as a mission to be executed. It was remarkable that the hopefulness which is often the beneficent illusion of consumptive patients, was in Mordecai wholly diverted from the prospect of bodily recovery and carried into the current of this yearning for transmission. The yearning, which had panted upward from out of overwhelming discouragements, had grown into a hope – the hope into a confident belief, which, instead of being checked by the clear conception he had of his hastening decline, took rather the intensity of expectant faith in a prophecy which has only brief space to get fulfilled in.

Some years had now gone since he had first begun to measure men with a keen glance, searching for a possibility which became more and more a distinct conception. Such distinctness as it had at first was reached chiefly by a method of contrast: he wanted to find a man who differed from himself. Tracing reasons in that self for the rebuffs he had met with and the hindrances that beset him, he imagined a man who would have all the elements necessary for sympathy with him, but in an embodiment unlike his own: he must be a Jew, intellectually cultured, morally fervid – in all this a nature ready to be plenished from Mordecai's; but his face and frame must be beautiful and strong, he must have been used to all the refinements of social life, his voice must flow with a full and easy current, his circumstances be free from sordid need: he must glorify the possibilities of the Jew, not sit and wander as Mordecai did, bearing the stamp of his people amid the signs of poverty and waning breath. Sensitive to physical characteristics, he had, both abroad and in England, looked at pictures as well as men, and in a vacant hour he had sometimes lingered in the National Gallery in search of paintings which might feed his hopefulness with grave and noble types of the human form, such as might well belong to men of his own race. But he returned in disappointment. The instances are scattered but thinly over the galleries of Europe, in which the fortune or selection even of the chief masters has given to Art a face at once young, grand, and beautiful, where, if there is any melancholy, it is no feeble passivity, but enters into the foreshadowed capability of heroism.

Some observant persons may perhaps remember his emaciated figure, and dark eyes deep in their sockets, as he stood in front of a picture that had touched him either to new or habitual meditation: he commonly

wore a cloth cap with black fur round it, which no painter would have asked him to take off. But spectators would be likely to think of him as an odd-looking Jew, who probably got money out of pictures; and Mordecai, when he noticed them, was perfectly aware of the impression he made. Experience had rendered him morbidly alive to the effect of a man's poverty and other physical disadvantages in cheapening his ideas, unless they are those of a Peter the Hermit who has a tocsin for the rabble. But he was too sane and generous to attribute his spiritual banishment solely to the excusable prejudices of others: certain incapacities of his own had made the sentence of exclusion; and hence it was that his imagination had constructed another man who would be something more ample than the second soul bestowed, according to the notion of the Cabbalists, to help out the insufficient first – who would be a blooming human life, ready to incorporate all that was worthiest in an existence whose visible, palpable part was burning itself fast away. His inward need for the conception of this expanded, prolonged self was reflected as an outward necessity. The thoughts of his heart (that ancient phrase best shadows the truth) seemed to him too precious, too closely inwoven with the growth of things not to have a further destiny. And as the more beautiful, the stronger, the more executive self took shape in his mind, he loved it before-hand with an affection half identifying, half contemplative and grateful.

Mordecai's mind wrought so constantly in images, that his coherent trains of thought often resembled the significant dreams attributed to sleepers by waking persons in their most inventive moments; nay, they often resembled genuine dreams in their way of breaking off the passage from the known to the unknown. Thus, for a long while, he habitually thought of the Being answering to his need as one distantly approaching or turning his back towards him, darkly painted against a golden sky. The reason of the golden sky lay in one of Mordecai's habits. He was keenly alive to some poetic aspects of London; and a favourite resort of his, when strength and leisure allowed, was to some one of the bridges, especially about sunrise or sunset. Even when he was bending over watch-wheels and trinkets, or seated in a small upper room looking out on dingy bricks and dingy cracked windows, his imagination spontaneously planted him on some spot where he had a far-stretching scene; his thought went on in wide spaces; and whenever he could, he tried to have in reality the influences of a large sky. Leaning on the parapet of Blackfriars Bridge, and gazing meditatively, the breath and calm of the river, with its long vista half hazy, half luminous, the grand dim masses or tall forms of buildings which were the signs of world-commerce, the oncoming of boats and barges from the still distance into sound and colour, entered into his mood and blent themselves indistinguishably with his thinking, as a fine symphony to which we can hardly be said to listen makes a medium that bears up our spiritual wings. Thus it happened that the figure representative of Mordecai's longing was mentally seen darkened by the excess of light in the aerial background. But in the inevitable progress of his imagination towards fuller detail, he ceased to see the figure with its back towards him. It began to advance, and a face became discernible; the words youth, beauty, refinement, Jewish birth, noble gravity, turned into hardly individual but typical form and colour: gathered from his memory of faces seen among the Jews of Holland and Bohemia, and from the paintings which revived that memory. Reverently let it be said of this mature spiritual need that it was akin to the boy's and girl's picturing of the future beloved; but the stirrings of such young desire are feeble compared with the passionate current of an ideal life straining to embody itself, made intense by resistance to imminent dissolution. The visionary form became a companion and auditor; keeping a place not only in the waking imagination, but in those dreams of lighter slumber of which it is truest to say, 'I sleep, but my heart waketh' – when the disturbing trivial story of yesterday is charged with the impassioned purpose of years.

Of late the urgency of irredeemable time, measured by the gradual choking of life, had turned Mordecai's trust into an agitated watch for the fulfilment that must be at hand. Was the bell on the verge of tolling, the sentence about to be executed? The deliverer's footstep must be near – the deliverer who was to rescue Mordecai's spiritual travail from oblivion, and give it an abiding place in the best heritage of his people. An insane exaggeration of his own value, even if his ideas had been as true and precious as those of Columbus or Newton, many would have counted this yearning, taking it as the sublimer part for a man to say, 'if not I, then another,' and to hold cheap the meaning of his own life. But the fuller nature desires to be an agent, to create, and not merely to look on: strong love hungers to bless, and not merely to behold blessing. And while there is warmth enough in the sun to feed an energetic life, there will still be men to feel, 'I am lord of this moment's change, and will charge it with my soul.'

But with that mingling of inconsequence which belongs to us all, and not unhappily, since it saves us from many effects of mistake, Mordecai's confidence in the friend to come did not suffice to make him passive, and he tried expedients, pathetically humble, such as happened to be within his reach, for communicating something of himself. It was now two years since he had taken up his abode under Ezra Cohen's roof, where he was regarded with much goodwill as a compound of workman, dominie, vessel of charity, inspired idiot, man of piety, and (if he were inquired into) dangerous heretic. During that time little Jacob had advanced into knickerbockers, and into that quickness of apprehension which has been already made manifest in

relation to hardware and exchange. He had also advanced in attachment to Mordecai, regarding him as an inferior, but liking him none the worse, and taking his helpful cleverness as he might have taken the services of an enslaved Djinn. As for Mordecai, he had given Jacob his first lessons, and his habitual tenderness easily turned into the teacher's fatherhood. Though he was fully conscious of the spiritual distance between the parents and himself, and would never have attempted any communication to them from his peculiar world, the boy moved him with that idealising affection which merges the qualities of the individual child in the glory of childhood and the possibilities of a long future. And this feeling had drawn him on, at first without premeditation, and afterwards with conscious purpose, to a sort of outpouring in the ear of the boy which might have seemed wild enough to any excellent man of business who overheard it. But none overheard when Jacob went up to Modecai's room on a day, for example, in which there was little work to be done, or at an hour when the work was ended, and after a brief lesson in English reading or in numeration, was induced to remain standing at his teacher's knees, or chose to jump astride them, often to the patient fatigue of the wasted limbs. The inducement was perhaps the mending of a toy, or some little mechanical device in which Mordecai's well-practised finger-tips had an exceptional skill; and with the boy thus tethered, he would begin to repeat a Hebrew poem of his own, into which years before he had poured his first youthful ardours for that conception of a blended past and future which was the mistress of his soul, telling Jacob to say the words after him.

'The boy will get them engraved within him,' thought Mordecai; 'it is a way of printing.'

None readier than Jacob at this fascinating game of imitating unintelligible words; and if no opposing diversion occurred, he would sometimes carry on his share in it as long as the teacher's breath would last out. For Mordecai threw into each repetition the fervour befitting a sacred occasion. In such instances, Jacob would show no other distraction than reaching out and surveying the contents of his pockets; or drawing down the skin of his cheeks to make his eyes look awful, and rolling his head to complete the effect; or alternately handling his own nose and Mordecai's as if to test the relation of their masses. Under all this the fervid reciter would not pause, satisfied if the young organs of speech would submit themselves. But most commonly a sudden impulse sent Jacob leaping away into some antic or active amusement, when, instead of following the recitation, he would return upon the foregoing words most ready to his tongue, and mouth or gabble, with a see-saw suited to the action of his limbs, a verse on which Mordecai had spent some of his too scanty heart's blood. Yet he waited with such patience as a prophet needs, and began his strange printing again undiscouraged on the morrow, saying inwardly –

'My words may rule him some day. Their meaning may flash out on him. It is so with a nation – after many days.'

Meanwhile Jacob's sense of power was increased and his time enlivened by a store of magical articulation with which he made the baby crow, or drove the large cat into a dark corner, or promised himself to frighten any incidental Christian of his own years. One week he had unfortunately seen a street mountebank, and this carried off his muscular imitativeness in sad divergence from New Hebrew poetry after the model of Jehuda ha-Levi. Mordecai had arrived at a fresh passage in his poem; for as soon as Jacob had got well used to one portion, he was led on to another, and a fresh combination of sounds generally answered better in keeping him fast for a few minutes. The consumptive voice, originally a strong high baritone with its variously mingling hoarseness, like a haze amidst illuminations, and its occasional incipient gasp, had more than the usual excitement, while it gave forth Hebrew verses with a meaning something like this: –

'Away from me the garment of forgetfulness,
Withering the heart;
The oil and wine from presses of the Goyim,
Poisoned with scorn.
Solitude is on the sides of Mount Nebo,
In its heart a tomb:
There the buried ark and golden cherubim
Make hidden light:
There the solemn faces gaze unchanged,
The wings are spread unbroken:
Shut beneath in silent awful speech
The Law lies graven.
Solitude and darkness are my covering,
And my heart a tomb;
Smite and shatter it, O Gabriel!
Shatter it as the clay of the founder
Around the golden image.'

In the absorbing enthusiasm with which Mordecai had intoned rather than spoken this last invocation, he was unconscious that Jacob had ceased to follow him and had started away from his knees; but pausing he saw, as by a sudden flash, that the lad had thrown himself on his hands with his feet in the air, mountebank

fashion, and was picking up with his lips a bright farthing which was a favourite among his pocket treasures. This might have been reckoned among the tricks Mordecai was used to, but at this moment it jarred him horribly, as if it had been a Satanic grin upon his prayer.

'Child! child!' he called out with a strange cry that startled Jacob to his feet, and then he sank backward with a shudder, closing his eyes.

'What?' said Jacob, quickly. Then, not getting an immediate answer, he pressed Mordecai's knees with a shaking movement, in order to rouse him. Mordecai opened his eyes with a fierce expression in them, leaned forward, grasped the little shoulders, and said in a quick, hoarse whisper –

'A curse is on your generation, child. They will open the mountain and drag forth the golden wings and coin them into money, and the solemn faces they will break up into earrings for wanton women! And they shall get themselves a new name, but the angel of ignominy, with the fiery brand, shall know them, and their heart shall be the tomb of dead desires that turn their life to rottenness.'

The aspect and action of Mordecai were so new and mysterious to Jacob – they carried such a burthen of obscure threat – it was as if the patient, indulgent companion had turned into something unknown and terrific: the sunken dark eyes and hoarse accents close to him, the thin grappling fingers, shook Jacob's little frame into awe, and while Mordecai was speaking he stood trembling with a sense that the house was tumbling in and they were not going to have dinner any more. But when the terrible speech had ended and the pinch was relaxed, the shock resolved itself into tears; Jacob lifted up his small patriarchal countenance and wept aloud. This sign of childish grief at once recalled Mordecai to his usual gentle self: he was not able to speak again at present, but with a maternal action he drew the curly head towards him and pressed it tenderly against his breast. On this Jacob, feeling the danger wellnigh over, howled at ease, beginning to imitate his own performance and improve upon it – a sort of transition from impulse into art often observable. Indeed, the next day he undertook to terrify Adelaide Rebekah in like manner, and succeeded very well.

But Mordecai suffered a check which lasted long, from the consciousness of a misapplied agitation; sane as well as excitable, he judged severely his moments of aberration into futile eagerness, and felt discredited with himself. All the more his mind was strained towards the discernment of that friend to come, with whom he would have a calm certainty of fellowship and understanding.

It was just then that, in his usual mid-day guardianship of the old book-shop, he was struck by the appearance of Deronda, and it is perhaps comprehensible now why Mordecai's glance took on a sudden eager interest as he looked at the new-comer: he saw a face and frame which seemed to him to realise the long-conceived type. But the disclaimer of Jewish birth was for the moment a backward thrust of double severity, the particular disappointment tending to shake his confidence in the more indefinite expectation. Nevertheless, when he found Deronda seated at the Cohens' table, the disclaimer was for the moment nullified: the first impression returned with added force, seeming to be guaranteed by this second meeting under circumstances more peculiar than the former; and in asking Deronda if he knew Hebrew, Mordecai was so possessed by the new inrush of belief, that he had forgotten the absence of any other condition to the fulfilment of his hopes. But the answering 'No' struck them all down again, and the frustration was more painful than before. After turning his back on the visitor that Sabbath evening, Mordecai went through days of a deep discouragement, like that of men on a doomed ship, who, having strained their eyes after a sail, and beheld it with rejoicing, behold it never advance, and say, 'Our sick eyes make it.' But the long-contemplated figure had come as an emotional sequence of Mordecai's firmest theoretic convictions; it had been wrought from the imagery of his most passionate life; and it inevitably reappeared – reappeared in a more specific self-asserting form than ever. Deronda had that sort of resemblance to the preconceived type which a finely individual bust or portrait has to the more generalised copy left in our minds after a long interval: we renew our memory with delight, but we hardly know with how much correction. And now, his face met Mordecai's inward gaze as if it had always belonged to the awaited friend, raying out, moreover, some of that influence which belongs to breathing flesh; till by-and-by it seemed that discouragement had turned into a new obstinacy of resistance, and the ever-recurrent vision had the force of an outward call to disregard counter-evidence, and keep expectation awake. It was Deronda now who was seen in the often painful night-watches, when we are all liable to be held with the clutch of a single thought – whose figure, never with its back turned, was seen in moments of soothed reverie or soothed dozing, painted on that golden sky which was the doubly blessed symbol of advancing day and of approaching rest.

Mordecai knew that the nameless stranger was to come and redeem his ring; and, in spite of contrary chances, the wish to see him again was growing into a belief that he should see him. In the January weeks, he felt an increasing agitation of that subdued hidden quality which hinders nervous people from any steady occupation on the eve of an anticipated change. He could not go on with his printing of Hebrew on little Jacob's mind; or with his attendance at a weekly club, which was another effort of the same forlorn hope: something else was coming. The one thing he longed for was to get as far as the river, which he could do but

seldom and with difficulty. He yearned with a poet's yearning for the wide sky, the far-reaching vista of bridges, the tender and fluctuating lights on the water which seems to breathe with a life that can shiver and mourn, be comforted and rejoice.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Vor den Wissenden sich stellen
Sicher ist's in allen Fällen!
Wenn du lange dich gequälet
Weiss er gleich wo dir es fehlet:
Auch auf Beifall darfst du hoffen,
Denn er weiss wo du's getroffen.

– GOETHE: *West-östlicher Divan*[15]

Momentous things happened to Deronda the very evening of that visit to the small house at Chelsea, when there was the discussion about Mirah's public name. But for the family group there, what appeared to be the chief sequence connected with it occurred two days afterwards. About four o'clock wheels paused before the door, and there came one of those knocks with an accompanying ring which serve to magnify the sense of social existence in a region where the most enlivening signals are usually those of the muffinman. All the girls were at home, and the two rooms were thrown together to make space for Kate's drawing, as well as a great length of embroidery which had taken the place of the satin cushions – a sort of *pièce de résistance* in the courses of needlework, taken up by any clever fingers that happened to be at liberty. It stretched across the front room picturesquely enough, Mrs Meyrick bending over it at one corner, Mab in the middle, and Amy at the other end. Mirah, whose performances in point of sewing were on the make-shift level of the tailor-bird's, her education in that branch having been much neglected, was acting as reader to the party, seated on a camp-stool; in which position she also served Kate as model for a title-page vignette, symbolising a fair public absorbed in the successive volumes of the Family Tea-table. She was giving forth with charming distinctness the delightful Essay of Elia, 'The Praise of Chimney-Sweeps,' and all were smiling over the 'innocent blacknesses,' when the imposing knock and ring called their thoughts to loftier spheres, and they looked up in wonderment.

'Dear me!' said Mrs Meyrick; 'can it be Lady Mallinger? Is there a grand carriage, Amy?'

'No – only a hansom cab. It must be a gentleman.'

'The Prime Minister, I should think,' said Kate, drily. 'Hans says the greatest man in London may get into a hansom cab.'

'Oh, oh, oh!' cried Mab. 'Suppose it should be Lord Russell!'

The five bright faces were all looking amused when the old maid-servant bringing in a card distractedly left the parlour-door open, and there was seen bowing towards Mrs Meyrick a figure quite unlike that of the respected Premier – tall and physically impressive even in his kid and kerseymere, with massive face, flamboyant hair, and gold spectacles: in fact, as Mrs Meyrick saw from the card, *Julius Klesmer*.

Even embarrassment could hardly have made the 'little mother' awkward, but quick in her perceptions she was at once aware of the situation, and felt well satisfied that the great personage had come to Mirah instead of requiring her to come to him; taking it as a sign of active interest. But when he entered, the rooms shrank into closets, the cottage piano, Mab thought, seemed a ridiculous toy, and the entire family existence as petty and private as an establishment of mice in the Tuileries. Klesmer's personality, especially his way of glancing round him, immediately suggested vast areas and a multitudinous audience, and probably they made the usual scenery of his consciousness, for we all of us carry on our thinking in some habitual *locus* where there is a presence of other souls, and those who take in a larger sweep than their neighbours are apt to seem mightily vain and affected. Klesmer was vain, but not more so than many contemporaries of heavy aspect, whose vanity leaps out and startles one like a spear out of a walking-stick; as to his carriage and gestures, these were as natural to him as the length of his fingers; and the rankest affectation he could have shown would have been to look diffident and demure. While his grandiose air was making Mab feel herself a ridiculous toy to match the cottage piano, he was taking in the details around him with a keen and thoroughly kind sensibility. He remembered a home no larger than this on the outskirts of Bohemia; and in the figurative Bohemia too he had had large acquaintance with the variety and romance which belong to small incomes. He addressed Mrs Meyrick with the utmost deference.

'I hope I have not taken too great a freedom. Being in the neighbourhood, I ventured to save time by

calling. Our friend Mr Deronda mentioned to me an understanding that I was to have the honour of becoming acquainted with a young lady here – Miss Lapidoth.'

Klesmer had really discerned Mirah in the first moment of entering, but with subtle politeness he looked round bowingly at the three sisters as if he were uncertain which was the young lady in question.

'Those are my daughters: this is Miss Lapidoth,' said Mrs Meyrick, waving her hand towards Mirah.

'Ah,' said Klesmer, in a tone of gratified expectation, turning a radiant smile and deep bow to Mirah, who, instead of being in the least taken by surprise, had a calm pleasure in her face. She liked the look of Klesmer, feeling sure that he would scold her, like a great musician and a kind man.

'You will not object to beginning our acquaintance by singing to me,' he added, aware that they would all be relieved by getting rid of preliminaries.

'I shall be very glad. It is good of you to be willing to listen to me,' said Mirah, moving to the piano. 'Shall I accompany myself?'

'By all means,' said Klesmer, seating himself, at Mrs Meyrick's invitation, where he could have a good view of the singer. The acute little mother would not have acknowledged the weakness, but she really said to herself, 'He will like her singing better if he sees her.'

All the feminine hearts except Mirah's were beating fast with anxiety, thinking Klesmer terrific as he sat with his listening frown on, and only daring to look at him furtively. If he did say anything severe it would be so hard for them all. They could only comfort themselves with thinking that Prince Camaralzaman, who had heard the finest things, preferred Mirah's singing to any other: – also she appeared to be doing her very best, as if she were more instead of less at ease that usual.

The song she had chosen was a fine setting of some words selected from Leopardi's grand Ode to Italy: –[16]

'*O patria mia, vedo le mura e gli archi*
E le colonne e i simulacri e l'erme
Torri degli avi nostri' –

This was recitative: then followed –

'*Ma la gloria non vedo*' –

a mournful melody, a rhythmic plaint. After this came a climax of devout triumph – passing from the subdued adoration of a happy Andante in the words –

'*Beatissimi voi,*
Che offriste il petto alle nemiche lance
Per amor di costei che al sol vi diede' –

to the joyous outburst of an exultant Allegro in –

'*Oh viva, oh viva:*
Beatissimi voi
Mentre nel mondo si favelli o scriva.'

When she had ended, Klesmer said after a moment –

'That is Joseph Leo's music.'

'Yes, he was my last master – at Vienna: so fierce and so good,' said Mirah, with a melancholy smile. 'He prophesied that my voice would not do for the stage. And he was right.'

'*Con*tinue, if you please,' said Klesmer, putting out his lips and shaking his long fingers, while he went on with a smothered articulation quite unintelligible to the audience.

The three girls detested him unanimously for not saying one word of praise. Mrs Meyrick was a little alarmed.

Mirah, simply bent on doing what Klesmer desired, and imagining that he would now like to hear her sing some German, went through Prince Radzivill's music to Gretchen's songs in the 'Faust,' one after the other, without any interrogatory pause. When she had finished he rose and walked to the extremity of the small space at command, then walked back to the piano, where Mirah had risen from her seat and stood looking towards him with her little hands crossed before her, meekly awaiting judgment; then with a sudden unknitting of his brow and with beaming eyes, he put out his hand and said abruptly, 'Let us shake hands: you are a musician.'

Mab felt herself beginning to cry, and all the three girls held Klesmer adorable. Mrs Meyrick took a long breath.

But straightway the frown came again, the long hand, back uppermost, was stretched out in quite a different sense to touch with finger-tip the back of Mirah's, and with protruded lip he said –

'Not for great tasks. No high roofs. We are no skylarks. We must be modest.' Klesmer paused here. And Mab ceased to think him adorable: 'as if Mirah had shown the least sign of conceit!'

Mirah was silent, knowing that there was a specific opinion to be waited for, and Klesmer presently went on

–

‘I would not advise – I would not further your singing in any larger space than a private drawing-room. But you will do there. And here in London that is one of the best careers open. Lessons will follow. Will you come and sing at a private concert at my house on Wednesday?’

‘Oh, I shall be grateful,’ said Mirah, putting her hands together devoutly. ‘I would rather get my bread in that way than by anything more public. I will try to improve. What should I work at most?’

Klesmer made a preliminary answer in noises which sounded like words bitten in two and swallowed before they were half out, shaking his fingers the while, before he said, quite distinctly, ‘I shall introduce you to Astorga: he is the foster-father of good singing and will give you advice.’ Then addressing Mrs Meyrick, he added, ‘Mrs Klesmer will call before Wednesday, with your permission.’

‘We shall feel that to be a great kindness,’ said Mrs Meyrick.

‘You will sing to her,’ said Klesmer, turning again to Mirah. ‘She is a thorough musician, and has a soul with more ears to it than you will often get in a musician. Your singing will satisfy her: –

‘Vor den Wissenden sich stellen;’

you know the rest?’

‘“Sicher ist’s in allen Fällen,” ’

said Mirah, promptly. And Klesmer saying ‘Schön!’ put out his hand again as a good-bye.

He had certainly chosen the most delicate way of praising Mirah, and the Meyrick girls had now given him all their esteem. But imagine Mab’s feeling when, suddenly fixing his eyes on her, he said decisively, ‘That young lady is musical, I see!’ She was a mere blush and sense of scorching.

‘Yes,’ said Mirah on her behalf. ‘And she has a touch.’

‘Oh please, Mirah – a scramble, not a touch,’ said Mab, in anguish, with a horrible fear of what the next thing might be: this dreadfully divining personage – evidently Satan in grey trousers – might order her to sit down to the piano, and her heart was like molten wax in the midst of her. But this was cheap payment for her amazed joy when Klesmer said benignantly, turning to Mrs Meyrick, ‘Will she like to accompany Miss Lapidoth and hear the music on Wednesday?’

‘There could hardly be a greater pleasure for her,’ said Mrs Meyrick. ‘She will be most glad and grateful.’

Thereupon Klesmer bowed round to the three sisters more grandly than they had ever been bowed to before. Altogether it was an amusing picture – the little room with so much of its diagonal taken up in Klesmer’s magnificent bend to the small feminine figures like images a little less than life-size, the grave Holbein faces on the walls, as many as were not otherwise occupied, looking hard at this stranger who by his face seemed a dignified contemporary of their own, but whose garments seemed a deplorable mockery of the human form.

Mrs Meyrick could not help going out of the room with Klesmer and closing the door behind her. He understood her, and said with a frowning nod –

‘She will do: if she doesn’t attempt too much and her voice holds out, she can make an income. I know that is the great point: Deronda told me. You are taking care of her. She looks like a good girl.’

‘She is an angel,’ said the warm-hearted woman.

‘No,’ said Klesmer, with a playful nod; ‘she is a pretty Jewess: the angels must not get the credit of her. But I think she has found a guardian angel,’ he ended, bowing himself out in this amiable way.

The four young creatures had looked at each other mutely till the door banged and Mrs Meyrick re-entered. Then there was an explosion. Mab clapped her hands and danced everywhere inconveniently; Mrs Meyrick kissed Mirah and blessed her; Amy said emphatically, ‘We can never get her a new dress before Wednesday!’ and Kate exclaimed, ‘Thank heaven my table is not knocked over!’

Mirah had reseated herself on the music-stool without speaking, and the tears were rolling down her cheeks as she looked at her friends.

‘Now, now, Mab!’ said Mrs Meyrick; ‘come and sit down reasonably and let us talk.’

‘Yes, let us talk,’ said Mab, cordially, coming back to her low seat and caressing her knees. ‘I am beginning to feel large again. Hans said he was coming this afternoon. I wish he had been here – only there would have been no room for him. Mirah, what are you looking sad for?’

‘I am too happy,’ said Mirah. ‘I feel so full of gratitude to you all; and he was so very kind.’

‘Yes, at last,’ said Mab, sharply. ‘But he might have said something encouraging sooner. I thought him dreadfully ugly when he sat frowning, and only said, “*Con*tinue.” I hated him all the long way from the top of his hair to the toe of his polished boot.’

‘Nonsense, Mab; he has a splendid profile,’ said Kate.

‘*Now*, but not *then*. I cannot bear people to keep their minds bottled up for the sake of letting them off with a pop. They seem to grudge making you happy unless they can make you miserable beforehand. However, I

forgive him everything,' said Mab, with a magnanimous air, 'because he has invited me. I wonder why he fixed on me as the musical one? Was it because I have a bulging forehead, ma, and peep from under it like a newt from under a stone?'

'It was your way of listening to the singing, child,' said Mrs Meyrick. 'He has magic spectacles and sees everything through them, depend upon it. But what was that German quotation you were so ready with, Mirah – you learned puss?'

'Oh, that was not learning,' said Mirah, her tearful face breaking into an amused smile. 'I said it so many times for a lesson. It means that it is safer to do anything – singing or anything else – before those who know and understand all about it.'

'That was why you were not one bit frightened, I suppose,' said Amy. 'But now, what we have to talk about is a dress for you on Wednesday.'

'I don't want anything better than this black merino,' said Mirah, rising to show the effect. 'Some white gloves and some new *bottines*.' She put out her little foot, clad in the famous felt slipper.

'There comes Hans,' said Mrs Meyrick. 'Stand still, and let us hear what he says about the dress. Artists are the best people to consult about such things.'

'You don't consult me, ma,' said Kate, lifting up her eyebrow with a playful complainingness. 'I notice mothers are like the people I deal with – the girls' doings are always priced low.'

'My dear child, the boys are such a trouble – we could never put up with them, if we didn't make believe they were worth more,' said Mrs Meyrick, just as her boy entered. 'Hans, we want your opinion about Mirah's dress. A great event has happened. Klesmer has been here, and she is going to sing at his house on Wednesday among grand people. She thinks this dress will do.'

'Let me see,' said Hans. Mirah in her childlike way turned towards him to be looked at; and he, going to a little further distance, knelt with one knee on a hassock to survey her.

'This would be thought a very good stage-dress for me,' she said, pleadingly, 'in a part where I was to come on as a poor Jewess and sing to fashionable Christians.'

'It would be effective,' said Hans, with a considering air; 'it would stand out well among the fashionable *chiffons*.'

'But you ought not to claim all the poverty on your side, Mirah,' said Amy. 'There are plenty of poor Christians and dreadfully rich Jews and fashionable Jewesses.'

'I didn't mean any harm,' said Mirah. 'Only I have been used to thinking about my dress for parts in plays. And I almost always had a part with a plain dress.'

'That make me think it questionable,' said Hans, who had suddenly become as fastidious and conventional on this occasion as he had thought Deronda was, apropos of the Berenice-pictures. 'It looks a little too theatrical. We must not make you a *rôle* of the poor Jewess – or of being a Jewess at all.' Hans had a secret desire to neutralise the Jewess in private life, which he was in danger of not keeping secret.

'But it is what I am really. I am not pretending anything. I shall never be anything else,' said Mirah. 'I always feel myself a Jewess.'

'But we can't feel that about you,' said Hans, with a devout look. 'What does it signify whether a perfect woman is a Jewess or not?'

'That is your kind way of praising me; I never was praised so before,' said Mirah, with a smile, which was rather maddening to Hans and made him feel still more of a cosmopolitan.

'People don't think of me as a British Christian,' he said, his face creasing merrily. 'They think of me as an imperfectly handsome young man and an unpromising painter.'

'But you are wandering from the dress,' said Amy. 'If that will not do, how are we to get another before Wednesday? and to-morrow Sunday?'

'Indeed this will do,' said Mirah, entreatingly. 'It is all real, you know,' here she looked at Hans – 'even if it seemed theatrical. Poor Berenice sitting on the ruins – any one might say that was theatrical, but I know that is just what she would do.'

'I am a scoundrel,' said Hans, overcome by this misplaced trust. 'That is my invention. Nobody knows that she did that. Shall you forgive me for not saying so before?'

'Oh yes,' said Mirah, after a momentary pause of surprise. 'You knew it was what she would be sure to do – a Jewess who had not been faithful – who had done what she did and was penitent. She could have no joy but to afflict herself; and where else would she go? I think it is very beautiful that you should enter so into what a Jewess would feel.'

'The Jewesses of that time sat on ruins,' said Hans, starting up with a sense of being checkmated. 'That makes them convenient for pictures.'

'But the dress – the dress,' said Amy; 'is it settled?'

'Yes; is it not?' said Mirah, looking doubtfully at Mrs Meyrick, who in her turn looked up at her son, and

said, ‘What do you think, Hans?’

‘That dress will not do,’ said Hans, decisively. ‘She is not going to sit on ruins. You must jump into a cab with her, little mother, and go to Regent Street. It’s plenty of time to get anything you like – a black silk dress such as ladies wear. She must not be taken for an object of charity. She has talents to make people indebted to her.’

‘I think it is what Mr Deronda would like – for her to have a handsome dress,’ said Mrs Meyrick, deliberating.

‘Of course it is,’ said Hans, with some sharpness. ‘You may take my word for what a gentleman would feel.’

‘I wish to do what Mr Deronda would like me to do,’ said Mirah, gravely, seeing that Mrs Meyrick looked towards her; and Hans, turning on his heel, went to Kate’s table and took up one of her drawings as if his interest needed a new direction.

‘Shouldn’t you like to make a study of Klesmer’s head, Hans?’ said Kate. ‘I suppose you have often seen him?’

‘Seen him!’ exclaimed Hans, immediately throwing back his head and mane, seating himself at the piano and looking round him as if he were surveying an amphitheatre, while he held his fingers down perpendicularly towards the keys. But then in another instant he wheeled round on the stool, looked at Mirah and said, half timidly – ‘Perhaps you don’t like this mimicry; you must always stop my nonsense when you don’t like it.’

Mirah had been smiling at the swiftly-made image, and she smiled still, but with a touch of something else than amusement, as she said – ‘Thank you. But you have never done anything I did not like. I hardly think he could, belonging to you,’ she added, looking at Mrs Meyrick.

In this way Hans got food for his hope. How could the rose help it when several bees in succession took its sweet odour as a sign of personal attachment?

Chapter Forty

Within the soul a faculty abides,
That with interpositions, which would hide
And darken, so can deal, that they become
Contingencies of pomp; and serve to exalt
Her native brightness, as the ample moon,
In the deep stillness of a summer even,
Rising behind a thick and lofty grove,
Burns, like an unconsuming fire of light,
In the green trees; and, kindling on all sides
Their leafy umbrage, turns the dusky veil
Into a substance glorious as her own,
Yea, with her own incorporated, by power
Capacious and serene.

– WORDSWORTH: *Excursion,* B. IV

Deronda came out of the narrow house at Chelsea in a frame of mind that made him long for some good bodily exercise to carry off what he was himself inclined to call the fumes of his temper. He was going towards the city, and the sight of the Chelsea Stairs with the waiting boats at once determined him to avoid the irritating inaction of being driven in a cab, by calling a wherry and taking an oar.

His errand was to go to Ram's book-shop, where he had yesterday arrived too late for Mordecai's mid-day watch, and had been told that he invariably came there again between five and six. Some further acquaintance with this remarkable inmate of the Cohens was particularly desired by Deronda as a preliminary to redeeming his ring: he wished that their conversation should not again end speedily with that drop of Mordecai's interest which was like the removal of a drawbridge, and threatened to shut out any easy communication in future. As he got warmed with the use of the oar, fixing his mind on the errand before him and the ends he wanted to achieve on Mirah's account, he experienced, as was wont with him, a quick change of mental light, shifting his point of view to that of the person whom he had been thinking of hitherto chiefly as serviceable to his own purposes, and was inclined to taunt himself with being not much better than an enlisting sergeant, who never troubles himself with the drama that brings him the needful recruits.

'I suppose if I got from this man the information I am most anxious about,' thought Deronda, 'I should be contented enough if he felt no disposition to tell me more of himself, or why he seemed to have some expectation from me which was disappointed. The sort of curiosity he stirs would die out; and yet it might be that he had neared and parted as one can imagine two ships doing, each freighted with an exile who would have recognised the other if the two could have looked out face to face. Not that there is any likelihood of a peculiar tie between me and this poor fellow, whose voyage, I fancy, must soon be over. But I wonder whether there is much of that momentous mutual missing between people who interchange blank looks, or even long for one another's absence in a crowded place. However, one makes one's self chances of missing by going on the recruiting sergeant's plan.'

When the wherry was approaching Blackfriars Bridge, where Deronda meant to land, it was half-past four, and the grey day was dying gloriously, its western clouds all broken into narrowing purple strate before a wide-spreading saffron clearness, which in the sky had a monumental calm, but on the river, with its changing objects, was reflected as a luminous movement, the alternate flash of ripples or currents, the sudden glow of the brown sail, the passage of laden barges from blackness into colour, making an active response to that brooding glory.

Feeling well heated by this time, Deronda gave up the oar and drew over him again his Inverness cape. As he lifted up his head while fastening the topmost button, his eyes caught a well-remembered face looking towards him over the parapet of the bridge – brought out by the western light into startling distinctness and brilliancy – an illuminated type of bodily emaciation and spiritual eagerness. It was the face of Mordecai, who also, in his watch towards the west, had caught sight of the advancing boat, and had kept it fast within his gaze, at first simply because it was advancing, then with a recovery of impressions that made him quiver as with a presentiment, till at last the nearing figure lifted up its face towards him – the face of his visions – and then immediately, with white uplifted hand, beckoned again and again.

For Deronda, anxious that Mordecai should recognise and await him, had lost no time before signalling, and the answer came straightway. Mordecai lifted his cap and waved it – feeling in that moment that his inward prophecy was fulfilled. Obstacles, incongruities, all melted into the sense of completion with which his soul was flooded by this outward satisfaction of his longing. His exultation was not widely different from that of the experimenter, bending over the first stirrings of change that correspond to what in the fervour of concentrated prevision his thought has foreshadowed. The prefigured friend had come from the golden background, and had signalled to him: this actually was: the rest was to be.

In three minutes Deronda had landed, had paid his boatman, and was joining Mordecai, whose instinct it was to stand perfectly still and wait for him.

'I was very glad to see you standing here,' said Deronda, 'for I was intending to go on to the book-shop and look for you again. I was there yesterday – perhaps they mentioned it to you?'

'Yes,' said Mordecai; 'that was the reason I came to the bridge.'

This answer, made with simple gravity, was startlingly mysterious to Deronda. Were the peculiarities of this man really associated with any sort of mental alienation, according to Cohen's hint?

'You knew nothing of my being at Chelsea?' he said, after a moment.

'No: but I expected you to come down the river. I have been waiting for you these five years.' Mordecai's deep-sunk eyes were fixed on those of the friend who had at last arrived with a look of affectionate dependence, at once pathetic and solemn. Deronda's sensitiveness was not the less responsive because he could not but believe that this strangely-disclosed relation was founded on an illusion.

'It will be a satisfaction to me if I can be of any real use to you,' he answered, very earnestly. 'Shall we get into a cab and drive to – wherever you wish to go? You have probably had walking enough with your short breath.'

'Let us go to the book-shop. It will soon be time for me to be there. But now look up the river,' said Mordecai, turning again towards it and speaking in undertones of what may be called an excited calm – so absorbed by a sense of fulfilment that he was conscious of no barrier to a complete understanding between him and Deronda. 'See the sky, how it is slowly fading. I have always loved this bridge: I stood on it when I was a little boy. It is a meeting-place for the spiritual messengers. It is true – what the Masters said – that each order of things has its angel: that means the full message of each from what is afar. Here I have listened to the messages of earth and sky; when I was stronger I used to stay and watch for the stars in the deep heavens. But this time just about sunset was always what I loved best. It has sunk into me and dwelt with me – fading, slowly fading: it was my own decline: it paused – it waited, till at last it brought me my new life – my new self – who will live when this breath is all breathed out.'

Deronda did not speak. He felt himself strangely wrought upon. The first-prompted suspicion that Mordecai might be liable to hallucinations of thought – might have become a monomaniac on some subject which had given too severe a strain to his diseased organism – gave way to a more submissive expectancy. His nature was too large, too ready to conceive regions beyond his own experience, to rest at once in the easy explanation, 'madness,' whenever a consciousness showed some fulness and conviction where his own was blank. It accorded with his habitual disposition that he should meet rather than resist any claim on him in the shape of another's need; and this claim brought with it a sense of solemnity which seemed a radiation from Mordecai, as utterly nullifying his outward poverty and lifting him into authority as if he had been that preternatural guide seen in the universal legend, who suddenly drops his mean disguise and stands a manifest Power. That impression was the more sanctioned by a sort of resolved quietude which the persuasion of fulfilment had produced in Mordecai's manner. After they had stood a moment in silence he said, 'Let us go now;' and when they were walking he added, 'We will get down at the end of the street and walk to the shop. You can look at the books, and Mr Ram will be going away directly and leave us alone.'

It seemed that this enthusiast was just as cautious, just as much alive to judgments in other minds as if he had been that antipole of all enthusiasm called 'a man of the world.'

While they were rattling along in the cab, Mirah was still present with Deronda in the midst of this strange experience, but he foresaw that the course of conversation would be determined by Mordecai, not by himself: he was no longer confident what questions he should be able to ask; and with a reaction on his own mood, he inwardly said, 'I suppose I am in a state of complete superstition, just as if I were awaiting the destiny that could interpret the oracle. But some strong relation there must be between me and this man, since he feels it strongly. Great heaven! what relation has proved itself more potent in the world than faith even when mistaken – than expectation even when perpetually disappointed? Is my side of the relation to be disappointing or fulfilling? – well, if it is ever possible for me to fulfil, I will not disappoint.'

In ten minutes the two men, with as intense a consciousness as if they had been two undeclared lovers, felt themselves alone in the small gas-lit book-shop and turned face to face, each baring his head from an instinctive feeling that they wished to see each other fully. Mordecai came forward to lean his back against

the little counter, while Deronda stood against the opposite wall hardly more than four feet off. I wish I could perpetuate those two faces, as Titian's 'Tribute Money' has perpetuated two types presenting another sort of contrast. Imagine – we all of us can – the pathetic stamp of consumption with its brilliancy of glance to which the sharply-defined structure of features reminding one of a forsaken temple, give already a far-off look as of one getting unwillingly out of reach; and imagine it on a Jewish face naturally accentuated for the expression of an eager mind – the face of a man little above thirty, but with that age upon it which belongs to time lengthened by suffering, the hair and beard still black throwing out the yellow pallor of the skin, the difficult breathing giving more decided marking to the mobile nostril, the wasted yellow hands conspicuous on the folded arms: then give to the yearning consumptive glance something of the slowly dying mother's look when her one loved son visits her bedside, and the flickering power of gladness leaps out as she says, 'My boy!' – for the sense of spiritual perpetuation in another resembles that maternal transference of self.

Seeing such a portrait you would see Mordecai. And opposite to him was a face not more distinctively oriental than many a type seen among what we call the Latin races: rich in youthful health, and with a forcible masculine gravity in its repose, that gave the value of judgment to the reverence with which he met the gaze of this mysterious son of poverty who claimed him as a long-expected friend. The more exquisite quality of Deronda's nature – that keenly perceptive sympathetic emotiveness which ran along with his speculative tendency – was never more thoroughly tested. He felt nothing that could be called belief in the validity of Mordecai's impressions concerning him or in the probability of any greatly effective issue: what he felt was a profound sensibility to a cry from the depths of another soul; and accompanying that, the summons to be receptive instead of superciliously prejudging. Receptiveness is a rare and massive power, like fortitude; and this state of mind now gave Deronda's face its utmost expression of calm benignant force – an expression which nourished Mordecai's confidence and made an open way before him. He began to speak.

'You cannot know what has guided me to you and brought us together at this moment. You are wondering.'

'I am not impatient,' said Deronda. 'I am ready to listen to whatever you may wish to disclose.'

'You see some of the reasons why I needed you,' said Mordecai, speaking quietly, as if he wished to reserve his strength. 'You see that I am dying. You see that I am as one shut up behind bars by the wayside, who if he spoke to any would be met only by head-shaking and pity. The day is closing – the light is fading – soon we should not have been able to discern each other. But you have come in time.'

'I rejoice that I am come in time,' said Deronda, feelingly. He would not say, 'I hope you are not mistaken in me,' – the very word 'mistaken,' he thought, would be a cruelty at that moment.

'But the hidden reasons why I need you began afar off,' said Mordecai; 'began in my early years when I was studying in another land. Then ideas, beloved ideas, came to me, because I was a Jew. They were a trust to fulfil, because I was a Jew. They were an inspiration, because I was a Jew, and felt the heart of my race beating within me. They were my life; I was not fully born till then. I counted this heart, and this breath, and this right hand' – Mordecai had pathetically pressed his hand against his breast, and then stretched its wasted fingers out before him – 'I counted my sleep and my waking, and the work I fed my body with, and the sights that fed my eyes – I counted them but as fuel to the divine flame. But I had done as one who wanders and engraves his thought in rocky solitudes, and before I could change my course came care and labour and disease, and blocked the way before me, and bound me with the iron that eats itself into the soul. Then I said, "How shall I save the life within me from being stifled with this stifled breath?" '

Mordecai paused to rest that poor breath which had been taxed by the rising excitement of his speech. And also he wished to check that excitement. Deronda dared not speak: the very silence in the narrow space seemed alive with mingled awe and compassion before this struggling fervour. And presently Mordecai went on –

'But you may misunderstand me. I speak not as an ignorant dreamer – as one bred up in the inland valleys, thinking ancient thoughts anew, and not knowing them ancient, never having stood by the great waters where the world's knowledge passes to and fro. English is my mother-tongue, England is the native land of this body, which is but as a breaking pot of earth around the fruit-bearing tree, whose seed might make the desert rejoice. But my true life was nourished in Holland, at the feet of my mother's brother, a Rabbi skilled in special learning; and when he died I went to Hamburg to study, and afterwards to Göttingen, that I might take a larger outlook on my people, and on the Gentile world, and drink knowledge at all sources. I was a youth; I felt free; I saw our chief seats in Germany; I was not then in utter poverty. And I had possessed myself of a handicraft. For I said, I care not if my lot be as that of Joshua ben Chananja: after the last destruction he earned his bread by making needles, but in his youth he had been a singer on the steps of the Temple, and had a memory of what was, before the glory departed. I said, let my body dwell in poverty, and my hands be as the hands of the toiler; but let my soul be as a temple of remembrance where the treasures of knowledge enter and the inner sanctuary is hope. I knew what I chose. They said, "He feeds himself on visions," and I denied not; for visions are the creators and feeders of the world. I see, I measure the world as it is, which the vision

will create anew. You are not listening to one who raves aloof from the lives of his fellows.'

Mordecai paused, and Deronda, feeling that the pause was expectant, said, 'Do me the justice to believe that I was not inclined to call your words raving. I listen that I may know, without prejudgment. I have had experience which gives me a keen interest in the story of a spiritual destiny embraced willingly, and embraced in youth.'

'A spiritual destiny embraced willingly – in youth?' Mordecai repeated in a corrective tone. 'It was the soul fully born within me, and it came in my boyhood. It brought its own world – a mediaeval world, where there were men who made the ancient language live again in new psalms of exile. They had absorbed the philosophy of the Gentile into the faith of the Jew, and they still yearned toward a centre for our race. One of their souls was born again within me, and awaked amid the memories of their world. It travelled into Spain and Provence; it debated with Aben-Ezra; it took ship with Jehuda ha-Levi; it heard the roar of the Crusaders and the shrieks of tortured Israel. And when its dumb tongue was loosed, it spoke the speech they had made alive with the new blood of their ardour, their sorrow, and their martyred trust: it sang with the cadence of their strain.'

Mordecai paused again, and then said in a loud, hoarse whisper –

'While it is imprisoned in me, it will never learn another.'

'Have you written entirely in Hebrew, then?' said Deronda, remembering with some anxiety the former question as to his own knowledge of that tongue.

'Yes – yes,' said Mordecai, in a tone of deep sadness; 'in my youth I wandered toward that solitude, not feeling that it was a solitude. I had the ranks of the great dead around me; the martyrs gathered and listened. But soon I found that the living were deaf to me. At first I saw my life spread as a long future: I said, part of my Jewish heritage is an unbreaking patience; part is skill to seek divers methods and find a rooting-place where the planters despair. But there came new messengers from the Eternal. I had to bow under the yoke that presses on the great multitude born of woman: family troubles called me – I had to work, to care, not for myself alone. I was left solitary again; but already the angel of death had turned to me and beckoned, and I felt his skirts continually on my path. I loosed not my effort. I besought hearing and help. I spoke; I went to men of our people – to the rich in influence or knowledge, to the rich in other wealth. But I found none to listen with understanding. I was rebuked for error; I was offered a small sum in charity. No wonder. I looked poor; I carried a bundle of Hebrew manuscript with me; I said, our chief teachers are misleading the hope of our race. Scholar and merchant were both too busy to listen. Scorn stood as interpreter between me and them. One said, "The Book of Mormon would never have answered in Hebrew; and if you mean to address our learned men, it is not likely you can teach them anything." He touched a truth there.'

The last words had a perceptible irony in their hoarsened tone.

'But though you had accustomed yourself to write in Hebrew, few, surely, can use English better,' said Deronda, wanting to hint consolation in a new effort for which he could smooth the way.

Mordecai shook his head slowly, and answered –

'Too late – too late. I can write no more. My writing would be like this gasping breath. But the breath may wake the fount of pity – the writing not. If I could write now and used English, I should be as one who beats a board to summon those who have been used to no signal but a bell. My soul has an ear to hear the faults of its own speech. New writing of mine would be like this body' – Mordecai spread his arms – 'within it there might be the Ruach-ha-kodesh – the breath of divine thought – but men would smile at it and say, "A poor Jew!" – and the chief smilers would be of my own people.'

Mordecai let his hands fall, and his head sink in melancholy: for the moment he had lost hold of his hope. Despondency, conjured up by his own words, had floated in and hovered above him with eclipsing wings. He had sunk into momentary darkness.

'I feel with you – I feel strongly with you,' said Deronda, in a clear deep voice which was itself a cordial, apart from the words of sympathy. 'But – forgive me if I speak hastily – for what you have actually written there need be no utter burial. The means of publication are within reach. If you will rely on me, I can assure you of all that is necessary to that end.'

'That is not enough,' said Mordecai, quickly, looking up again with the flash of recovered memory and confidence. 'That is not all my trust in you. You must be not only a hand to me, but a soul – believing my belief – being moved by my reasons – hoping my hope – seeing the vision I point to – beholding a glory where I behold it!' – Mordecai had taken a step nearer as he spoke, and now laid his hand on Deronda's arm with a tight grasp; his face little more than a foot off had something like a pale flame in it – an intensity of reliance that acted as a peremptory claim, while he went on – 'You will be my life: it will be planted afresh; it will grow. You shall take the inheritance; it has been gathering for ages. The generations are crowding on my narrow life as a bridge: what has been and what is to be are meeting there; and the bridge is breaking. But I have found you. You have come in time. You will take the inheritance which the base son refuses because of

the tombs which the plough and harrow may not pass over or the gold-seeker disturb: you will take the sacred inheritance of the Jew.'

Deronda had become as pallid as Mordecai. Quick as an alarm of flood or fire, there spread within him not only a compassionate dread of discouraging this fellow-man who urged a prayer as of one in the last agony, but also the opposing dread of fatally feeding an illusion, and being hurried on to a self-committal which might turn into a falsity. The peculiar appeal to his tenderness overcame the repulsion that most of us experience under a grasp and speech which assume to dominate. The difficulty to him was to inflict the accents of hesitation and doubt on this ardent suffering creature, who was crowding too much of his brief being into a moment of perhaps extravagant trust. With exquisite instinct, Deronda, before he opened his lips, placed his palm gently on Mordecai's straining hand – an act just then equal to many speeches. And after that he said, without haste, as if conscious that he might be wrong –

'Do you forget what I told you when we first saw each other? Do you remember that I said I was not of your race?'

'It can't be true,' Mordecai whispered immediately, with no sign of shock. The sympathetic hand still upon him had fortified the feeling which was stronger than those words of denial. There was a perceptible pause, Deronda feeling it impossible to answer, conscious indeed that the assertion, 'It can't be true' – had the pressure of argument for him. Mordecai, too entirely possessed by the supreme importance of the relation between himself and Deronda to have any other care in his speech, followed up that assertion by a second, which came to his lips as a mere sequence of his long-cherished conviction –

'You are not sure of your own origin.'

'How do you know that?' said Daniel, with an habitual shrinking which made him remove his hand from Mordecai's, who also relaxed his hold, and fell back into his former leaning position.

'I know it – I know it; what is my life else?' said Mordecai, with a low cry of impatience. 'Tell me everything: tell me why you deny.'

He could have no conception what that demand was to the hearer – how probingly it touched the hidden sensibility, the vividly conscious reticence of years; how the uncertainty he was insisting on as part of his own hope had always for Daniel been a threatening possibility of painful revelation about his mother. But the moment had influences which were not only new but solemn to Deronda: any evasion here might turn out to be a hateful refusal of some task that belonged to him, some act of due fellowship; in any case it would be a cruel rebuff to a being who was appealing to him as a forlorn hope under the shadow of a coming doom. After a few moments, he said, with a great effort over himself – determined to tell all the truth briefly –

'I have never known my mother. I have no knowledge about her. I have never called any man father. But I am convinced that my father is an Englishman.'

Deronda's deep tones had a tremor in them as he uttered this confession; and all the while there was an under-current of amazement in him at the strange circumstances under which he uttered it. It seemed as if Mordecai were hardly overrating his own power to determine the action of the friend whom he had mysteriously chosen.

'It will be seen – it will be declared,' said Mordecai, triumphantly. 'The world grows, and its frame is knit together by the growing soul; dim, dim at first, then clearer and more clear, the consciousness discerns remote stirrings. As thoughts move within us darkly, and shake us before they are fully discerned – so events – so beings: they are knit with us in the growth of the world. You have risen within me like a thought not fully spelled: my soul is shaken before the words are all there. The rest will come – it will come.'

'We must not lose sight of the fact that the outward event has not always been a fulfilment of the firmest faith,' said Deronda, in a tone that was made hesitating by the painfully conflicting desires, not to give any severe blow to Mordecai, and not to give his confidence a sanction which might have the severest of blows in reserve.

Mordecai's face, which had been illuminated to the utmost in that last declaration of his confidence, changed under Deronda's words, but not into any show of collapsed trust: the force did not disappear from the expression, but passed from the triumphant into the firmly resistant.

'You would remind me that I may be under an illusion – that the history of our people's trust has been full of illusion. I face it all.' Here Mordecai paused a moment. Then bending his head a little forward, he said, in his hoarse whisper, '*So it might be with my trust, if you would make it an illusion. But you will not*.'

The very sharpness with which these words penetrated Deronda, made him feel the more that here was a crisis in which he must be firm.

'What my birth was does not lie in my will,' he answered. 'My sense of claims on me cannot be independent of my knowledge there. And I cannot promise you that I will try to hasten a disclosure. Feelings which have struck root through half my life may still hinder me from doing what I have never yet been able to do. Everything must be waited for. I must know more of the truth about my own life, and I must know more of

what it would become if it were made a part of yours.'

Mordecai had folded his arms again while Deronda was speaking, and now answered with equal firmness, though with difficult breathing –

'You *shall* know. What are we met for, but that you should know? Your doubts lie as light as dust on my belief. I know the philosophies of this time and of other times: if I chose I could answer a summons before their tribunals. I could silence the beliefs which are the mother-tongue of my soul and speak with the rote-learned language of a system, that gives you the spelling of all things, sure of its alphabet covering them all. I could silence them: may not a man silence his awe or his love and take to finding reasons, which others demand? But if his love lies deeper than any reasons to be found? Man finds his pathways: at first they were foot-tracks, as those of the beast in the wilderness; now they are swift and invisible: his thought dives through the ocean, and his wishes thread the air: has he found all the pathways yet? What reaches him, stays with him, rules him: he must accept it, not knowing its pathway. Say, my expectation of you has grown but as false hopes grow. That doubt is in your mind? Well, my expectation was there, and you are come. Men have died of thirst. But I was thirsty, and the water is on my lips. What are doubts to me? In the hour when you come to me and say, "I reject your soul: I know that I am not a Jew: we have no lot in common" – I shall not doubt. I shall be certain – certain that I have been deluded. That hour will never come!'

Deronda felt a new chord sounding in this speech: it was rather imperious than appealing – had more of conscious power than of the yearning need which had acted as a beseeching grasp on him before. And usually, though he was the reverse of pugnacious, such a change of attitude towards him would have weakened his inclination to admit a claim. But here there was something that balanced his resistance and kept it aloof. This strong man whose gaze was sustainedly calm and his finger-nails pink with health, who was exercised in all questioning, and accused of excessive mental independence, still felt a subduing influence over him in the tenacious certitude of the fragile creature before him, whose pallid yellow nostril was tense with effort as his breath laboured under the burthen of eager speech. The influence seemed to strengthen the bond of sympathetic obligation. In Deronda at this moment the desire to escape what might turn into a trying embarrassment was no more likely to determine action than the solicitation of indolence are likely to determine it in one with whom industry is a daily law. He answered simply –

'It is my wish to meet and satisfy your wishes wherever that is possible to me. It is certain to me at least that I desire not to undervalue your toil and your suffering. Let me know your thoughts. But where can we meet?'

'I have thought of that,' said Mordecai. 'It is not hard for you to come into this neighbourhood later in the evening? You did so once.'

'I can manage it very well occasionally,' said Deronda. 'You live under the same roof with the Cohens, I think?'

Before Mordecai could answer, Mr Ram re-entered to take his place behind the counter. He was an elderly son of Abraham, whose childhood had fallen on the evil times at the beginning of this century, and who remained amid this smart and instructed generation as a preserved specimen, soaked through and through with the effect of the poverty and contempt which were the common heritage of most English Jews seventy years ago. He had none of the oily cheerfulness observable in Mr Cohen's aspect: his very features – broad and chubby – showed that tendency to look mongrel without due cause which, in a miscellaneous London neighbourhood, may perhaps be compared with the marvels of imitation in insects, and may have been nature's imperfect effort on behalf of the purer Caucasian to shield him from the shame and spitting to which purer features would have been exposed in the times of zeal. Mr Ram dealt ably in books in the same way that he would have dealt in tins of meat and other commodities – without knowledge or responsibility as to the proportion of rottenness or nourishment they might contain. But he believed in Mordecai's learning as something marvellous, and was not sorry that his conversation should be sought by a bookish gentleman, whose visits had twice ended in a purchase. He greeted Deronda with a crabbed goodwill, and, putting on large silver spectacles, appeared at once to abstract himself in the daily accounts.

But Deronda and Mordecai were soon in the street together, and, without any explicit agreement as to their direction, were walking towards Ezra Cohen's.

'We can't meet there: my room is too narrow,' said Mordecai, taking up the thread of talk where they had dropped it. 'But there is a tavern not far from here where I sometimes go to a club. It is the *Hand and Banner*, in the street at the next turning, five doors down. We can have the parlour there any evening.'

'We can try that for once,' said Deronda. 'But you will perhaps let me provide you with some lodging, which would give you more freedom and comfort than where you are.'

'No; I need nothing. My outer life is as nought. I will take nothing less precious from you than your soul's brotherhood. I will think of nothing else yet. But I am glad you are rich. You did not need money on that diamond ring. You had some other motive for bringing it.'

Deronda was a little startled by this clear-sightedness; but before he could reply, Mordecai added – 'It is all one. Had you been in need of the money, the great end would have been that we should meet again. But you are rich?' he ended, in a tone of interrogation.

'Not rich, except in the sense that every one is rich who has more than he needs for himself.'

'I desired that your life should be free,' said Mordecai, dreamily – 'mine has been a bondage.'

It was clear that he had no interest in the fact of Deronda's appearance at the Cohens' beyond its relation to his own ideal purpose. Despairing of leading easily up to the question he wished to ask, Deronda determined to put it abruptly, and said –

'Can you tell me why Mrs Cohen, the mother, must not be spoken to about her daughter?'

There was no immediate answer, and he thought that he should have to repeat the question. The fact was that Mordecai had heard the words, but had to drag his mind to a new subject away from his passionate preoccupation. After a few moments, he replied with a careful effort such as he would have used if he had been asked the road to Holborn –

'I know the reason. But I will not speak even of trivial family affairs which I have heard in the privacy of the family. I dwell in their tent as in a sanctuary. Their history, so far as they injure none other, is their own possession.'

Deronda felt the blood mounting to his cheeks as a sort of rebuke he was little used to, and he also found himself painfully baffled where he had reckoned with some confidence on getting decisive knowledge. He became the more conscious of emotional strain from the excitements of the day; and although he had the money in his pocket to redeem his ring, he recoiled from the further task of a visit to the Cohens', which must be made not only under the former uncertainty, but under a new disappointment as to the possibility of its removal.

'I will part from you now,' he said, just before they could reach Cohen's door; and Mordecai paused, looking up at him with an anxious fatigued face under the gaslight.

'When will you come back?' he said, with slow emphasis.

'May I leave that unfixed? May I ask for you at the Cohens' any evening after your hour at the book-shop? There is no objection, I suppose, to their knowing that you and I meet in private?'

'None,' said Mordecai. 'But the days I wait now are longer than the years of my strength. Life shrinks: what was but a tithe is now the half. My hope abides in you.'

'I will be faithful,' said Deronda – he could not have left those words unuttered. 'I will come the first evening I can after seven: on Saturday or Monday, if possible. Trust me.'

He put out his ungloved hand. Mordecai, clasping it eagerly, seemed to feel a new instreaming of confidence, and he said with some recovered energy – 'This is come to pass, and the rest will come.'

That was their good-bye.

BOOK SIX

Revelations

Chapter Forty-One

> This, too, is probable, according to that saying of Agathon: 'It is a part of probability that many improbable things will happen.'
>
> – ARISTOTLE: *Poetics*

Imagine the conflict in a mind like Deronda's, given not only to feel strongly but to question actively, on the evening after that interview with Mordecai. To a young man of much duller susceptibilities the adventure might have seemed enough out of the common way to divide his thoughts; but it had stirred Deronda so deeply, that with the usual reaction of his intellect he began to examine the grounds of his emotion, and consider how far he must resist its guidance. The consciousness that he was half dominated by Mordecai's energetic certitude, and still more by his fervent trust, roused his alarm. It was his characteristic bias to shrink from the moral stupidity of valuing lightly what had come close to him, and of missing blindly in his own life of to-day the crises which he recognised as momentous and sacred in the historic life of men. If he had read of this incident as having happened centuries ago in Rome, Greece, Asia Minor, Palestine, Cairo, to some man young as himself, dissatisfied with his neutral life, and wanting some closer fellowship, some more special duty to give him ardour for the possible consequences of his work, it would have appeared to him quite natural that the incident should have created a deep impression on that far-off man, whose clothing and action would have been seen in his imagination as part of an age chiefly known to us through its more serious effects. Why should he be ashamed of his own agitated feeling merely because he dressed for dinner, wore a white tie, and lived among people who might laugh at his owning any conscience in the matter as the solemn folly of taking himself too seriously? – that bugbear of circles in which the lack of grave emotion passes for wit. From such cowardice before modish ignorance and obtuseness, Deronda shrank. But he also shrank from having his course determined by mere contagion, without consent of reason; or from allowing a reverential pity for spiritual struggle to hurry him along a dimly-seen path.

What, after all, had really happened? He knew quite accurately the answer Sir Hugo would have given: 'A consumptive Jew, possessed by a fanaticism which obstacles and hastening death intensified, had fixed on Deronda as the antitype of some visionary image, the offspring of wedded hope and despair: despair of his own life, irrepressible hope in the propagation of his fanatical beliefs. The instance was perhaps odd, exceptional in its form, but substantially it was not rare. Fanaticism was not so common as bankruptcy, but taken in all its aspects it was abundant enough. While Mordecai was waiting on the bridge for the fulfilment of his visions, another man was convinced that he had the mathematical key of the universe which would supersede Newton, and regarded all known physicists as conspiring to stifle his discovery and keep the universe locked; another, that he had the metaphysical key, with just that hair's-breadth of difference from the old wards which would make it fit exactly. Scattered here and there in every direction you might find a terrible person, with more or less power of speech, and with an eye either glittering or preternaturally dull, on the look-out for the man who must hear him; and in most cases he had volumes which it was difficult to get printed, or if printed to get read. This Mordecai happened to have a more pathetic aspect, a more passionate, penetrative speech than was usual with such monomaniacs: he was more poetical than a social reformer with coloured views of the new moral world in parallelograms, or than an enthusiast in sewage; still he came under the same class. It would be only right and kind to indulge him a little, to comfort him with such help as was practicable; but what likelihood was there that his notions had the sort of value he ascribed to them? In such cases a man of the world knows what to think beforehand. And as to Mordecai's conviction that he had found a new executive self, it might be preparing for him the worst of disappointments – that which presents itself as final.'

Deronda's ear caught all these negative whisperings; nay, he repeated them distinctly to himself. It was not the first but it was the most pressing occasion on which he had had to face this question of the family likeness among the heirs of enthusiasm, whether prophets or dreamers of dreams, whether the

> 'Great benefactors of mankind, deliverers,'

or the devotees of phantasmal discovery – from the first believer in his own unmanifested inspiration, down to the last inventor of an ideal machine that will achieve perpetual motion. The kinship of human passion, the

sameness of mortal scenery, inevitably fill fact with burlesque and parody. Error and folly have had their hecatombs of martyrs. Reduce the grandest type of man hitherto known to an abstract statement of his qualities and efforts, and he appears in dangerous company: say that, like Copernicus and Galileo, he was immovably convinced in the face of hissing incredulity; but so is the contriver of perpetual motion. We cannot fairly try the spirits by this sort of test. If we want to avoid giving the dose of hemlock or the sentence of banishment in the wrong case, nothing will do but a capacity to understand the subject-matter on which the immovable man is convinced, and fellowship with human travail, both near and afar, to hinder us from scanning any deep experience lightly. Shall we say, 'Let the ages try the spirits, and see what they are worth'? Why, we are the beginning of the ages, which can only be just by virtue of just judgments in separate human breasts – separate yet combined. Even steam-engines could not have got made without that condition, but must have stayed in the mind of James Watt.

This track of thinking was familiar enough to Deronda to have saved him from any contemptuous prejudgment of Mordecai, even if their communication had been free from that peculiar claim on himself strangely ushered in by some long-growing preparation in the Jew's agitated mind. This claim, indeed, considered in what is called a rational way, might seem justifiably dismissed as illusory and even preposterous; but it was precisely what turned Mordecai's hold on him from an appeal to his ready sympathy into a clutch on his struggling conscience. Our consciences are not all of the same pattern, an inner deliverance of fixed laws: they are the voice of sensibilities as various as our memories (which also have their kinship and likeness). And Deronda's conscience included sensibilities beyond the common, enlarged by his early habit of thinking himself imaginatively into the experience of others.

What was the claim this eager soul made upon him? – 'You must believe my beliefs – be moved by my reasons – hope my hopes – see the vision I point to – behold a glory where I behold it!' To take such a demand in the light of an obligation in any direct sense would have been preposterous – to have seemed to admit it would have been dishonesty; and Deronda, looking on the agitation of those moments, felt thankful that in the midst of his compassion he had preserved himself from the bondage of false concessions. The claim hung, too, on a supposition which might be – nay, probably was – in discordance with the full fact: the supposition that he, Deronda, was of Jewish blood. Was there ever a more hypothetic appeal?

But since the age of thirteen Deronda had associated the deepest experience of his affections with what was a pure supposition, namely, that Sir Hugo was his father: that was a hypothesis which had been the source of passionate struggle within him; by its light he had been accustomed to subdue feelings and to cherish them. He had been well used to find a motive in a conception which might be disproved; and he had been also used to think of some revelation that might influence his view of the particular duties belonging to him. To be in a state of suspense which was also one of emotive activity and scruple, was a familiar attitude of his conscience.

And now, suppose that wish-begotten belief in his Jewish birth, and that extravagant demand of discipleship, to be the foreshadowing of an actual discovery and a genuine spiritual result: suppose that Mordecai's ideas made a real conquest over Deronda's conviction? Nay, it was conceivable that as Mordecai needed and believed that he had found an active replenishment of himself, so Deronda might receive from Mordecai's mind the complete ideal shape of that personal duty and citizenship which lay in his own thought like sculptured fragments certifying some beauty yearned after but not traceable by divination.

As that possibility presented itself in his meditations, he was aware that it would be called dreamy, and began to defend it. If the influence he imagined himself submitting to had been that of some honoured professor, some authority in a seat of learning, some philosopher who had been accepted as a voice of the age, would a thorough receptiveness towards direction have been ridiculed? Only by those who hold it a sign of weakness to be obliged for an idea, and prefer to hint that they have implicitly held in a more correct form whatever others have stated with a sadly shortcoming explicitness. After all, what was there but vulgarity in taking the fact that Mordecai was a poor Jewish workman, and that he was to be met perhaps on a sanded floor in the parlour of the *Hand and Banner*, as a reason for determining beforehand that there was not some spiritual force within him that might have a determining effect on a white-handed gentleman? There is a legend told of the Emperor Domitian, that having heard of a Jewish family, of the house of David, whence the ruler of the world was to spring, he sent for its members in alarm, but quickly released them on observing that they had the hands of work-people – being of just the opposite opinion with that Rabbi who stood waiting at the gate of Rome in confidence that the Messiah would be found among the destitute who entered there. Both Emperor and Rabbi were wrong in their trust of outward signs: poverty and poor clothes are no sign of inspiration, said Deronda to his inward objector, but they have gone with it in some remarkable cases. And to regard discipleship as out of the question because of them, would be mere dulness of imagination.

A more plausible reason for putting discipleship out of the question was the strain of visionary excitement in Mordecai, which turned his wishes into overmastering impressions, and made him read outward facts as fulfilment. Was such a temper of mind likely to accompany that wise estimate of consequences which is the

only safeguard from fatal error, even to ennobling motive? But it remained to be seen whether that rare conjunction existed or not in Mordecai: perhaps his might be one of the natures where a wise estimate of consequences is fused in the fires of that passionate belief which determines the consequences it believes in. The inspirations of the world have come in that way too: even strictly-measuring science could hardly have got on without that forecasting ardour which feels the agitations of discovery beforehand, and has a faith in its preconception that surmounts many failures of experiment. And in relation to human motives and actions, passionate belief has a fuller efficacy. Here enthusiasm may have the validity of proof, and, happening in one soul, give the type of what will one day be general.

At least, Deronda argued, Mordecai's visionary excitability was hardly a reason for concluding beforehand that he was not worth listening to except for pity's sake. Suppose he had introduced himself as one of the strictest reasoners: do they form a body of men hitherto free from false conclusions and illusory speculations? The driest argument has its hallucinations, too hastily concluding that its net will now at last be large enough to hold the universe. Men may dream in demonstrations, and cut out an illusory world in the shape of axioms, definitions, and propositions, with a final exclusion of fact signed Q.E.D. No formulas for thinking will save us mortals from mistake in our imperfect apprehension of the matter to be thought about. And since the unemotional intellect may carry us into a mathematical dreamland where nothing is but what is not, perhaps an emotional intellect may have absorbed into its passionate vision of possibilities some truth of what will be – the more comprehensive massive life feeding theory with new material, as the sensibility of the artist seizes combinations which science explains and justifies. At any rate, presumptions to the contrary are not to be trusted. We must be patient with the inevitable makeshift of our human thinking, whether in its sum total or in the separate minds that have made the sum. Columbus had some impressions about himself which we call superstitions, and used some arguments which we disapprove; but he had also some true physical conceptions, and he had the passionate patience of genius to make them tell on mankind. The world has made up its mind rather contemptuously about those who were deaf to Columbus.

'My contempt for them binds me to see that I don't adopt their mistake on a small scale,' said Deronda, 'and make myself deaf with the assumption that there cannot be any momentous relation between this Jew and me, simply because he has clad it in illusory notions. What I can be to him, or he to me, may not at all depend on his persuasion about the way we came together. To me the way seems made up of plainly discernible links. If I had not found Mirah, it is probable that I should not have begun to be specially interested in the Jews, and certainly I should not have gone on that loitering search after an Ezra Cohen which made me pause at Ram's book-shop and ask the price of *Maimon*. Mordecai, on his side, had his visions of a disciple, and he saw me by their light; I corresponded well enough with the image his longing had created. He took me for one of his race. Suppose that his impression – the elderly Jew at Frankfort seemed to have something like it – suppose, in spite of all presumptions to the contrary, that his impression should somehow be proved true, and that I should come actually to share any of the ideas he is devoted to? This is the only question which really concerns the effect of our meeting on my life.

'But if the issue should be quite different? – well, there will be something painful to go through. I shall almost inevitably have to be an active cause of that poor fellow's crushing disappointment. Perhaps this issue is the one I had need prepare myself for. I fear that no tenderness of mine can make his suffering lighter. Would the alternative – that I should not disappoint him – be less painful to me?'

Here Deronda wavered. Feelings had lately been at work within him which had very much modified the reluctance he would formerly have had to think of himself as probably a Jew. And, if you like, he was romantic. That young energy and spirit of adventure which have helped to create the world-wide legends of youthful heroes going to seek the hidden tokens of their birth and its inheritance of tasks, gave him a certain quivering interest in the bare possibility that he was entering on a like track – all the more because the track was one of thought as well as action.

'The bare possibility.' He could not admit it to be more. The belief that his father was an Englishman only grew firmer under the weak assaults of unwarranted doubt. And that a moment should ever come in which that belief was declared a delusion, was something of which Deronda would not say, 'I should be glad.' His lifelong affection for Sir Hugo, stronger than all his resentment, made him shrink from admitting that wish.

Which way soever the truth might lie, he repeated to himself what he had said to Mordecai – that he could not without farther reason undertake to hasten its discovery. Nay, he was tempted now to regard his uncertainty as a condition to be cherished for the present. If further intercourse revealed nothing but illusions as what he was expected to share in, the want of any valid evidence that he was a Jew might save Mordecai the worst shock in the refusal of fraternity. It might even be justifiable to use the uncertainty on this point in keeping up a suspense which would induce Mordecai to accept those offices of friendship that Deronda longed to urge on him.

These were the meditations that busied Deronda in the interval of four days before he could fulfil his

promise to call for Mordecai at Ezra Cohen's, Sir Hugo's demands on him often lasting to an hour so late as to put the evening expedition to Holborn out of the question.

Chapter Forty-Two

> Wenn es eine Stufenleiter von Leiden giebt, so hat Israel die höchste Staffel erstiegen; wenn die Dauer der Schmerzen und die Geduld, mit welcher sie ertragen werden, adeln, so nehmen es die Juden mit den Hochgeborenen aller Länder auf; wenn eine Literatur reich gennant wird, die wenige klassische Trauerspiele besitzt, welcher Platz gebührt dann einer Tragödie die anderthalb Jahrtausende währt, gedichtet und dargestellt von den Helden selber?
>
> ZUNZ: *Die Synagogale Poesie des Mittelalters*

'If there are ranks in suffering, Israel takes precedence of all the nations – if the duration of sorrows and the patience with which they are borne ennoble, the Jews are among the aristocracy of every land – if a literature is called rich in the possession of a few classic tragedies, what shall we say to a National Tragedy lasting for fifteen hundred years, in which the poets and the actors were also the heroes?'

Deronda had lately been reading that passage of Zunz, and it occurred to him by way of contrast when he was going to the Cohens, who certainly bore no obvious stamp of distinction in sorrow or in any other form of aristocracy. Ezra Cohen was not clad in the sublime pathos of the martyr, and his taste for money-getting seemed to be favoured with that success which has been the most exasperating difference in the greed of Jews during all the ages of their dispersion. This Jeshurun of a pawnbroker was not a symbol of the great Jewish tragedy; and yet was there not something typical in the fact that a life like Mordecai's – a frail incorporation of the national consciousness, breathing with difficult breath – was nested in the self-gratulating ignorant prosperity of the Cohens?

Glistening was the gladness in their faces when Deronda reappeared among them. Cohen himself took occasion to intimate that although the diamond ring, let alone a little longer, would have bred more money, he did not mind *that* – not a sixpence – when compared with the pleasure of the women and children in seeing a young gentleman whose first visit had been so agreeable that they had 'done nothing but talk of it ever since.' Young Mrs Cohen was very sorry that baby was asleep, and then very glad that Adelaide was not yet gone to bed, entreating Deronda not to stay in the shop but to go forthwith into the parlour to see 'mother and the children.' He willingly accepted the invitation, having provided himself with portable presents; a set of paper figures for Adelaide, and an ivory cup and ball for Jacob.

The grandmother had a pack of cards before her and was making 'plates' with the children. A plate had just been thrown down and kept itself whole.

'Stop!' said Jacob, running up to Deronda as he entered. 'Don't tread on my plate. Stop and see me throw it up again.'

Deronda complied, exchanging a smile of understanding with the grandmother, and the plate bore several tossings before it came to pieces; then the visitor was allowed to come forward and seat himself. He observed that the door from which Mordecai had issued on the former visit was now closed, but he wished to show his interest in the Cohens before disclosing a yet stronger interest in their singular inmate.

It was not until he had Adelaide on his knee, and was setting up the paper figures in their dance on the table, while Jacob was already practising with the cup and ball, that Deronda said –

'Is Mordecai in just now?'

'Where is he, Addy?' said Cohen, who had seized an interval of business to come and look on.

'In the workroom there,' said his wife, nodding towards the closed door.

'The fact is, sir,' said Cohen, 'we don't know what's come to him this last day or two. He's always what I may call a little touched, you know' – here Cohen pointed to his own forehead – 'not quite to say rational in all things, like you and me; but he's mostly wonderful regular and industrious as far as a poor creature can be, and takes as much delight in the boy as anybody could. But this last day or two he's been moving about like a sleep-walker, or else sitting as still as a wax figure.'

'It's the disease, poor dear creature,' said the grandmother, tenderly. 'I doubt whether he can stand long against it.'

'No; I think it's only something he's got in his head,' said Mrs Cohen the younger. 'He's been turning over writing continually, and when I speak to him it takes him ever so long to hear and answer.'

'You may think us a little weak ourselves,' said Cohen, apologetically. 'But my wife and mother wouldn't

part with him if he was a still worse encumbrance. It isn't that we don't know the long and short of matters, but it's our principle. There's fools do business at a loss and don't know it. I'm not one of 'em.'

'Oh, Mordecai carries a blessing inside him,' said the grandmother.

'He's got something the matter inside him,' said Jacob, coming up to correct this erratum of his grandmother's. 'He said he couldn't talk to me, and he wouldn't have a bit o' bun.'

'So far from wondering at your feeling for him,' said Deronda, 'I already feel something of the same sort myself. I have lately talked to him at Ram's book-shop – in fact, I promised to call for him here, that we might go out together.'

'That's it, then!' said Cohen, slapping his knee. 'He's been expecting you, and it's taken hold of him. I suppose he talks about his learning to you. It's uncommonly kind of *you*, sir; for I don't suppose there's much to be got out of it, else it wouldn't have left him where he is. But there's the shop.' Cohen hurried out, and Jacob, who had been listening inconveniently near to Deronda's elbow, said to him with obliging familiarity, 'I'll call Mordecai for you, if you like.'

'No, Jacob,' said his mother; 'open the door for the gentleman, and let him go in himself. Hush! don't make a noise.'

Skilful Jacob seemed to enter into the play, and turned the handle of the door as noiselessly as possible, while Deronda went behind him and stood on the threshold. The small room was lit only by a dying fire and one candle with a shade over it. On the board fixed under the window, various objects of jewellery were scattered: some books were heaped in the corner beyond them. Mordecai was seated on a high chair at the board with his back to the door, his hands resting on each other and on the board, a watch propped on a stand before him. He was in a state of expectation as sickening as that of a prisoner listening for the delayed deliverance – when he heard Deronda's voice saying, 'I am come for you. Are you ready?'

Immediately he turned without speaking, seized his furred cap which lay near, and moved to join Deronda. It was but a moment before they were both in the sitting-room, and Jacob, noticing the change in his friend's air and expression, seized him by the arm and said, 'See my cup and ball!' sending the ball up close to Mordecai's face, as something likely to cheer a convalescent. It was a sign of the relieved tension in Mordecai's mind that he could smile and say, 'Fine, fine!'

'You have forgotten your greatcoat and comforter,' said young Mrs Cohen, and he went back into the workroom and got them.

'He's come to life again, do you see?' said Cohen, who had re-entered – speaking in an undertone. 'I told you so: I'm mostly right.' Then in his usual voice, 'Well, sir, we mustn't detain you now, I suppose; but I hope this isn't the last time we shall see you.'

'Shall you come again?' said Jacob, advancing. 'See, I can catch the ball; I'll bet I catch it without stopping, if you come again.'

'He has clever hands,' said Deronda, looking at the grandmother. 'Which side of the family does he get them from?'

But the grandmother only nodded towards her son, who said promptly, 'My side. My wife's family are not in that line. But, bless your soul! ours is a sort of cleverness as good as gutta percha; you can twist it which way you like. There's nothing some old gentlemen won't do if you set 'em to it.' Here Cohen winked down at Jacob's back, but it was doubtful whether this judicious allusiveness answered its purpose, for its subject gave a nasal whinnying laugh and stamped about singing, 'Old gentlemen, old gentlemen,' in chiming cadence.

Deronda thought, 'I shall never know anything decisive about these people until I ask Cohen point-blank whether he lost a sister named Mirah when she was six years old.' The decisive moment did not yet seem easy for him to face. Still his first sense of repulsion at the commonness of these people was beginning to be tempered with kindlier feeling. However unrefined their airs and speech might be, he was forced to admit some moral refinement in their treatment of the consumptive workman, whose mental distinction impressed them chiefly as a harmless, silent raving.

'The Cohens seem to have an affection for you,' said Deronda, as soon as he and Mordecai were off the doorstep.

'And I for them,' was the immediate answer. 'They have the heart of the Israelite within them, though they are as the horse and the mule, without understanding beyond the narrow path they tread.'

'I have caused you some uneasiness, I fear,' said Deronda, 'by my slowness in fulfilling my promise. I wished to come yesterday, but I found it impossible.'

'Yes – yes, I trusted you. But it is true I have been uneasy, for the spirit of my youth has been stirred within me, and this body is not strong enough to bear the beating of its wings. I am as a man bound and imprisoned through long years: behold him brought to speech of his fellow and his limbs set free: he weeps, he totters, the joy within him threatens to break and overthrow the tabernacle of flesh.'

'You must not speak too much in this evening air,' said Deronda, feeling Mordecai's words of reliance like so

many cords binding him painfully. ‘Cover your mouth with the woollen scarf. We are going to the *Hand and Banner*, I suppose, and shall be in private there?’

‘No, that is my trouble that you did not come yesterday. For this is the evening of the club I spoke of, and we might not have any minutes alone until late, when all the rest are gone. Perhaps we had better seek another place. But I am used to that only. In new places the outer world presses on me and narrows the inward vision. And the people there are familiar with my face.’

‘I don’t mind the club if I am allowed to go in,’ said Deronda. ‘It is enough that you like this place best. If we have not enough time, I will come again. What sort of club is it?’

‘It is called, “The Philosophers.” They are few – like the cedars of Lebanon – poor men given to thought. But none so poor as I am: and sometimes visitors of higher worldly rank have been brought. We are allowed to introduce a friend, who is interested in our topics. Each orders beer or some other kind of drink, in payment for the room. Most of them smoke. I have gone when I could, for there are other men of my race who come, and sometimes I have broken silence. I have pleased myself with a faint likeness between these poor philosophers and the Masters who handed down the thought of our race – the great Transmitters, who laboured with their hands for scant bread, but preserved and enlarged for us the heritage of memory, and saved the soul of Israel alive as a seed among the tombs. The heart pleases itself with faint resemblances.’

‘I shall be very glad to go and sit among them, if that will suit you. It is a sort of meeting I should like to join in,’ said Deronda, not without relief in the prospect of an interval before he went through the strain of his next private conversation with Mordecai.

In three minutes they had opened the glazed door with the red curtain, and were in the little parlour, hardly much more than fifteen feet square, where the gaslight shone through a slight haze of smoke on what to Deronda was a new and striking scene. Half-a-dozen men of various ages, from between twenty and thirty to fifty, all shabbily dressed, most of them with clay pipes in their mouths, were listening with a look of concentrated intelligence to a man in a pepper-and-salt dress, with blond hair, short nose, broad forehead and general breadth, who, holding his pipe slightly uplifted in the left hand, and beating his knee with the right, was just finishing a quotation from Shelley (the comparison of the avalanche in his ‘Prometheus Unbound’) –

> ‘As thought by thought is piled, till some great truth
> Is loosened, and the nations echo round.’

The entrance of the new-comers broke the fixity of attention, and called for a re-arrangement of seats in the too narrow semicircle round the fireplace and the table holding the glasses, spare pipes, and tobacco. This was the soberest of clubs; but sobriety is no reason why smoking and ‘taking something’ should be less imperiously needed as a means of getting a decent status in company and debate. Mordecai was received with welcoming voices which had a slight cadence of compassion in them, but naturally all glances passed immediately to his companion.

‘I have brought a friend who is interested in our subjects,’ said Mordecai. ‘He has travelled and studied much.’

‘Is the gentleman anonymous? Is he a Great Unknown?’ said the broad-chested quoter of Shelley, with a humorous air.

‘My name is Daniel Deronda. I am unknown, but not in any sense great.’ The smile breaking over the stranger’s grave face as he said this was so agreeable that there was a general indistinct murmur, equivalent to a ‘Hear, hear,’ and the broad man said –

‘You recommend the name, sir, and are welcome. Here, Mordecai, come to this corner against me,’ he added, evidently wishing to give the coziest place to the one who most needed it.

Deronda was well satisfied to get a seat on the opposite side, where his general survey of the party easily included Mordecai, who remained an eminently striking object in this group of sharply-characterised figures, more than one of whom, even to Daniel’s little exercised discrimination, seemed probably of Jewish descent.

In fact, pure English blood (if leech or lancet can furnish us with the precise product) did not declare itself predominantly in the party at present assembled. Miller, the broad man, an exceptional second-hand bookseller who knew the insides of books, had at least grand-parents who called themselves German, and possibly far-away ancestors who denied themselves to be Jews; Buchan, the saddler, was Scotch; Pash, the watchmaker, was a small, dark, vivacious, triple-baked Jew; Gideon, the optical instrument maker, was a Jew of the red-haired, generous-featured type easily passing for Englishmen of unusually cordial manners; and Croop, the dark-eyed shoemaker, was probably more Celtic than he knew. Only three would have been discernible everywhere as Englishmen: the wood-inlayer Goodwin, well-built, open-faced, pleasant-voiced; the florid laboratory assistant Marrables; and Lilly, the pale, neat-faced copying clerk, whose light-brown hair was set up in a small parallelogram above his well-filled forehead, and whose shirt, taken with an otherwise seedy costume, had a freshness that might be called insular, and perhaps even something narrower.

Certainly a company select of the select among poor men, being drawn together by a taste not prevalent even among the privileged heirs of learning and its institutions; and not likely to amuse any gentleman in search of crime or low comedy as the ground of interest in people whose weekly income is only divisible into shillings. Deronda, even if he had not been more than usually inclined to gravity under the influence of what was pending between him and Mordecai, would not have set himself to find food for laughter in the various shades of departure from the tone of polished society sure to be observable in the air and talk of these men who had probably snatched knowledge as most of us snatch indulgences, making the utmost of scant opportunity. He looked around him with the quiet air of respect habitual to him among equals, ordered whisky and water, and offered the contents of his cigar-case, which, characteristically enough, he always carried and hardly ever used for his own behoof, having reasons for not smoking himself, but liking to indulge others. Perhaps it was his weakness to be afraid of seeming straitlaced, and turning himself into a sort of diagram instead of a growth which can exercise the guiding attraction of fellowship. That he made a decidedly winning impression on the company was proved by their showing themselves no less at ease than before, and desirous of quickly resuming their interrupted talk.

'This is what I call one of our touch and go nights, sir,' said Miller, who was implicitly accepted as a sort of moderator – addressing Deronda by way of explanation, and nodding toward each person whose name he mentioned. 'Sometimes we stick pretty close to the point. But to-night our friend Pash, there, brought up the law of progress, and we got on statistics; then Lilly, there, saying we knew well enough before counting that in the same state of society the same sort of things would happen, and it was no more wonder that quantities should remain the same than that qualities should remain the same, for in relation to society numbers are qualities – the number of drunkards is a quality in society – the numbers are an index to the qualities, and give us no instruction, only setting us to consider the causes of difference between different social states – Lilly saying this, we went off on the causes of social change, and when you came in I was going upon the power of ideas, which I hold to be the main transforming cause.'

'I don't hold with you there, Miller,' said Goodwin, the inlayer, more concerned to carry on the subject than to wait for a word from the new guest. 'For either you mean so many sorts of things by ideas that I get no knowledge by what you say, any more than if you said light was a cause; or else you mean a particular sort of ideas, and then I go against your meaning as too narrow. For, look at it in one way, all actions men put a bit of thought into are ideas – say, sowing seed, or making a canoe, or baking clay; and such ideas as these work themselves into life and go on growing with it, but they can't go apart from the material that set them to work and makes a medium for them. It's the nature of wood and stone yielding to the knife that raises the idea of shaping them, and with plenty of wood and stone the shaping will go on. I look at it, that such ideas as are mixed straight away with all the other elements of life are powerful along with 'em. The slower the mixing, the less power they have. And as to the causes of social change, I look at it in this way – ideas are a sort of parliament, but there's a commonwealth outside, and a good deal of the commonwealth is working at change without knowing what the parliament is doing.'

'But if you take ready mixing as your test of power,' said Pash, 'some of the least practical ideas beat everything. They spread without being understood, and enter into the language without being thought of.'

'They may act by changing the distribution of gases,' said Marables; 'instruments are getting so fine now, men may come to register the spread of a theory by observed changes in the atmosphere and corresponding changes in the nerves.'

'Yes,' said Pash, his dark face lighting up rather impishly, 'there is the idea of nationalities; I daresay the wild asses are snuffing it, and getting more gregarious.'

'You don't share that idea?' said Deronda, finding a piquant incongruity between Pash's sarcasm and the strong stamp of race on his features.

'Say rather, he does not share that spirit,' said Mordecai, who had turned a melancholy glance on Pash. 'Unless nationality is a feeling, what force can it have as an idea?'

'Granted, Mordecai,' said Pash, quite good-humouredly. 'And as the feeling of nationality is dying, I take the idea to be no better than a ghost, already walking to announce the death.'

'A sentiment may seem to be dying and yet revive into strong life,' said Deronda. 'Nations have revived. We may live to see a great outburst of force in the Arabs, who are being inspired with a new zeal.'

'Amen, amen,' said Mordecai, looking at Deronda with a delight which was the beginning of recovered energy: his attitude was more upright, his face was less worn.

'That may hold with backward nations,' said Pash, 'but with us in Europe the sentiment of nationality is destined to die out. It will last a little longer in the quarters where oppression lasts, but nowhere else. The whole current of progress is setting against it.'

'Ay,' said Buchan, in a rapid thin Scotch tone which was like the letting in of a little cool air on the conversation, 'ye've done well to bring us round to the point. Ye're all agreed that societies change – not

always and everywhere – but on the whole and in the long-run. Now, with all deference, I would beg t'observe that we have got to examine the nature of changes before we have a warrant to call them progress, which word is supposed to include a bettering, though I apprehend it to be ill chosen for that purpose, since mere motion onward may carry us to a bog or a precipice. And the questions I would put are three: Is all change in the direction of progress? if not, how shall we discern which change is progress and which not? and thirdly, how far and in what ways can we act upon the course of change so as to promote it where it is beneficial, and divert it where it is injurious?'

But Buchan's attempt to impose his method on the talk was a failure. Lilly immediately said –

'Change and progress are merged in the idea of development. The laws of development are being discovered, and changes taking place according to them are necessarily progressive; that is to say, if we have any notion of progress or improvement opposed to them, the notion is a mistake.'

'I really can't see how you arrive at that sort of certitude about changes by calling them development,' said Deronda. 'There will still remain the degrees of inevitableness in relation to our own will and acts, and the degrees of wisdom in hastening or retarding; there will still remain the danger of mistaking a tendency which should be resisted for an inevitable law that we must adjust ourselves to, – which seems to me as bad a superstition or false god as any that has been set up without the ceremonies of philosophising.'

'That is a truth,' said Mordecai. 'Woe to the men who see no place for resistance in this generation! I believe in a growth, a passage, and a new unfolding of life whereof the seed is more perfect, more charged with the elements that are pregnant with diviner form. The life of a people grows, it is knit together and yet expanded, in joy and sorrow, in thought and action; it absorbs the thought of other nations into its own forms, and gives back the thought as new wealth to the world; it is a power and an organ in the great body of the nations. But there may come a check, an arrest; memories may be stifled, and love may be faint for the lack of them; or memories may shrink into withered relics – the soul of a people, whereby they know themselves to be one, may seem to be dying for want of common action. But who shall say, "The fountain of their life is dried up, they shall for ever cease to be a nation"? Who shall say it? Not he who feels the life of his people stirring within his own. Shall he say, "That way events are wending, I will not resist"? His very soul is resistance, and is as a seed of fire that may enkindle the souls of multitudes, and make a new pathway for events.'

'I don't deny patriotism,' said Gideon, 'but we all know you have a particular meaning, Mordecai. You know Mordecai's way of thinking, I suppose.' Here Gideon had turned to Deronda, who sat next to him; but without waiting for an answer, he went on. 'I'm a rational Jew myself. I stand by my people as a sort of family relations, and I am for keeping up our worship in a rational way. I don't approve of our people getting baptised, because I don't believe in a Jew's conversion to the Gentile part of Christianity. And now we have political equality, there's no excuse for a pretence of that sort. But I am for getting rid of all our superstitions and exclusiveness. There's no reason now why we shouldn't melt gradually into the populations we live among. That's the order of the day in point of progress. I would as soon my children married Christians as Jews. And I'm for the old maxim, "A man's country is where he's well off." '

'That country's not so easy to find, Gideon,' said the rapid Pash, with a shrug and grimace. 'You get ten shillings a-week more than I do, and have only half the number of children. If somebody will introduce a brisk trade in watches among the "Jerusalem wares," I'll go – eh, Mordecai, what do you say?'

Deronda, all ear for these hints of Mordecai's opinion, was inwardly wondering at his persistence in coming to this club. For an enthusiastic spirit to meet continually the fixed indifference of men familiar with the object of his enthusiasm is the acceptance of a slow martyrdom, beside which the fate of a missionary tomahawked without any considerate rejection of his doctrines seems hardly worthy of compassion. But Mordecai gave no sign of shrinking: this was a moment of spiritual fulness, and he cared more for the utterance of his faith than for its immediate reception. With a fervour which had no temper in it, but seemed rather the rush of feeling in the opportunity of speech, he answered Pash: –

'What I say is, let every man keep far away from the brotherhood and the inheritance he despises. Thousands on thousands of our race have mixed with the Gentile as Celt with Saxon, and they may inherit the blessing that belongs to the Gentile. You cannot follow them. You are one of the multitudes over this globe who must walk among the nations and be known as Jews, and with words on their lips which mean, "I wish I had not been born a Jew, I disown any bond with the long travail of my race, I will outdo the Gentile in mocking at our separateness," they all the while feel breathing on them the breath of contempt because they are Jews, and they will breathe it back poisonously. Can a fresh-made garment of citizenship weave itself straightway into the flesh and change the slow deposit of eighteen centuries? What is the citizenship of him who walks among a people he has no hearty kindred and fellowship with, and has lost the sense of brotherhood with his own race? It is a charter of selfish ambition and rivalry in low greed. He is an alien in spirit, whatever he may be in form; he sucks the blood of mankind, he is not a man. Sharing in no love, sharing in no subjection of the soul, he mocks at all. Is it not truth I speak, Pash?'

‘Not exactly, Mordecai,’ said Pash, ‘if you mean that I think the worse of myself for being a Jew. What I thank our fathers for is that there are fewer blockheads among us than among other races. But perhaps you are right in thinking the Christians don’t like me so well for it.’

‘Catholics and Protestants have not liked each other much better,’ said the genial Gideon. ‘We must wait patiently for prejudices to die out. Many of our people are on a footing with the best, and there’s been a good filtering of our blood into high families. I am for making our expectations rational.’

‘And so am I!’ said Mordecai, quickly, leaning forward with the eagerness of one who pleads in some decisive crisis, his long thin hands clasped together on his lap. ‘I too claim to be a rational Jew. But what is it to be rational – what is it to feel the light of the divine reason growing stronger within and without? It is to see more and more of the hidden bonds that bind and consecrate change as a dependent growth – yea, consecrate it with kinship: the past becomes my parent, and the future stretches towards me the appealing arms of children. Is it rational to drain away the sap of special kindred that makes the families of man rich in interchanged wealth, and various as the forests are various with the glory of the cedar and the palm? When it is rational to say, “I know not my father or my mother, let my children be aliens to me, that no prayer of mine may touch them,” then it will be rational for the Jew to say, “I will seek to know no difference between me and the Gentile, I will not cherish the prophetic consciousness of our nationality – let the Hebrew cease to be, and let all his memorials be antiquarian trifles, dead as the wall-paintings of a conjectured race. Yet let his child learn by rote the speech of the Greek, where he adjures his fellow-citizens by the bravery of those who fought foremost at Marathon – let him learn to say, that was noble in the Greek, that is the spirit of an immortal nation! But the Jew has no memories that bind him to action; let him laugh that his nation is degraded from a nation; let him hold the monuments of his law which carried within its frame the breath of social justice, of charity, and of household sanctities – let him hold the energy of the prophets, the patient care of the Masters, the fortitude of martyred generations, as mere stuff for a professorship. The business of the Jew in all things is to be even as the rich Gentile.” ’

Mordecai threw himself back in his chair, and there was a moment’s silence. Not one member of the club shared his point of view or his emotion; but his whole personality and speech had on them the effect of a dramatic representation which had some pathos in it, though no practical consequences; and usually he was at once indulged and contradicted. Deronda’s mind went back on what must have been the tragic pressure of outward conditions hindering this man, whose force he felt to be telling on himself, from making any world for his thought in the minds of others – like a poet among people of a strange speech, who may have a poetry of their own, but have no ear for his cadence, no answering thrill to his discovery of latent virtues in his mother tongue.

The cool Buchan was the first to speak, and hint the loss of time. ‘I submit,’ said he, ‘that ye’re travelling away from the questions I put concerning progress.’

‘Say they’re levanting, Buchan,’ said Miller, who liked his joke, and would not have objected to be called Voltairian. ‘Never mind. Let us have a Jewish night; we’ve not had one for a long while. Let us take the discussion on Jewish ground. I suppose we’ve no prejudice here; we’re all philosophers; and we like our friends Mordecai, Pash, and Gideon, as well as if they were no more kin to Abraham than the rest of us. We’re all related through Adam, until further showing to the contrary, and if you look into history we’ve all got some discreditable forefathers. So I mean no offence when I say I don’t think any great things of the part the Jewish people have played in the world. What then? I think they were iniquitously dealt by in past times. And I suppose we don’t want any men to be maltreated, white, black, brown, or yellow – I know I’ve just given my half-crown to the contrary. And that reminds me, I’ve a curious old German book – I can’t read it myself, but a friend was reading out of it to me the other day – about the prejudices against the Jews, and the stories used to be told against ’em, and what do you think one was? Why, that they’re punished with a bad odour in their bodies; and *that*, says the author, date 1715 (I’ve just been pricing and marking the book this very morning) – that is true, for the ancients spoke of it. But then, he says, the other things are fables, such as that the odour goes away all at once when they’re baptised, and that every one of the ten tribes, mind you, all the ten being concerned in the crucifixion, has got a particular punishment over and above the smell: – Asher, I remember, has the right arm a handbreadth shorter than the left, and Naphthali has pigs’ ears and a smell of live pork. What do you think of that? There’s been a good deal of fun made of rabbinical fables, but in point of fables my opinion is, that all over the world it’s six of one and half-a-dozen of the other. However, as I said before, I hold with the philosophers of the last century that the Jews have played no great part as a people, though Pash will have it they’re clever enough to beat all the rest of the world. But if so, I ask, why haven’t they done it?’

‘For the same reason that the cleverest men in the country don’t get themselves or their ideas into Parliament,’ said the ready Pash; ‘because the blockheads are too many for ’em.’

‘That is a vain question,’ said Mordecai, ‘whether our people would beat the rest of the world. Each nation

has its own work, and is a member of the world, enriched by the work of each. But it is true, as Jehuda-ha-Levi first said, that Israel is the heart of mankind, if we mean by heart the core of affection which binds a race and its families in dutiful love, and the reverence for the human body which lifts the needs of our animal life into religion, and the tenderness which is merciful to the poor and weak and to the dumb creature that wears the yoke for us.'

'They're not behind any nation in arrogance,' said Lilly; 'and if they have got in the rear, it has not been because they were over-modest.'

'Oh, every nation brags in its turn,' said Miller.

'Yes,' said Pash, 'and some of them in the Hebrew text.'

'Well, whatever the Jews contributed at one time, they are a stand-still people,' said Lilly. 'They are the type of obstinate adherence to the superannuated. They may show good abilities when they take up liberal ideas, but as a race they have no development in them.'

'That is false!' said Mordecai, leaning forward again with his former eagerness. 'Let their history be known and examined; let the seed be sifted, let its beginning be traced to the weed of the wilderness – the more glorious will be the energy that transformed it. Where else is there a nation of whom it may be as truly said that their religion and law and moral life mingled as the stream of blood in the heart and made one growth – where else a people who kept and enlarged their spiritual store at the very time when they were hunted with a hatred as fierce as the forest fires that chase the wild beast from his covert? There is a fable of the Roman, that swimming to save his life he held the roll of his writings between his teeth and saved them from the waters. But how much more than that is true of our race? They struggled to keep their place among the nations like heroes – yea, when the hand was hacked off, they clung with the teeth; but when the plough and the harrow had passed over the last visible signs of their national covenant, and the fruitfulness of their land was stifled with the blood of the sowers and planters, they said, "The spirit is alive, let us make it a lasting habitation – lasting because movable – so that it may be carried from generation to generation, and our sons unborn may be rich in the things that have been, and possess a hope built on an unchangeable foundation." They said it and they wrought it, though often breathing with scant life, as in a coffin, or as lying wounded amid a heap of slain. Hooted and scared like the unknown dog, the Hebrew made himself envied for his wealth and wisdom, and was bled of them to fill the bath of Gentile luxury; he absorbed knowledge, he diffused it; his dispersed race was a new Phœonicia working the mines of Greece and carrying their products to the world. The native spirit of our tradition was not to stand still, but to use records as a seed, and draw out the compressed virtues of law and prophecy; and while the Gentile, who had said, "What is yours is ours, and no longer yours," was reading the letter of our law as a dark inscription, or was turning its parchments into shoe-soles for an army rabid with lust and cruelty, our Masters were still enlarging and illuminating with freshfed interpretation. But the dispersion was wide, the yoke of oppression was a spiked torture as well as a load; the exile was forced afar among brutish people, where the consciousness of his race was no clearer to him than the light of the sun to our fathers in the Roman persecution, who had their hiding-place in a cave, and knew not that it was day save by the dimmer burning of their candles. What wonder that multitudes of our people are ignorant, narrow, superstitious? What wonder?'

Here Mordecai, whose seat was next the fireplace, rose and leaned his arm on the little shelf; his excitement had risen, though his voice, which had begun with unusual strength, was getting hoarser.

'What wonder? The night is unto them, that they have no vision; in their darkness they are unable to divine; the sun is gone down over the prophets, and the day is dark above them; their observances are as nameless relics. But which among the chief of the Gentile nations has not an ignorant multitude? They scorn our people's ignorant observance; but the most accursed ignorance is that which has no observance – sunk to the cunning greed of the fox, to which all law is no more than a trap or the cry of the worrying hound. There is a degradation deep down below the memory that has withered into superstition. In the multitudes of the ignorant on three continents who observe our rites and make the confession of the divine Unity, the soul of Judaism is not dead. Revive the organic centre: let the unity of Israel which has made the growth and form of its religion be an outward reality. Looking towards a land and a polity, our dispersed people in all the ends of the earth may share the dignity of a national life which has a voice among the peoples of the East and the West – which will plant the wisdom and skill of our race so that it may be, as of old, a medium of transmission and understanding. Let that come to pass, and the living warmth will spread to the weak extremities of Israel, and superstition will vanish, not in the lawlessness of the renegade, but in the illumination of great facts which widen feeling, and make all knowledge alive as the young offspring of beloved memories.'

Mordecai's voice had sunk, but with the hectic brilliancy of his gaze it was not the less impressive. His extraordinary excitement was certainly due to Deronda's presence: it was to Deronda that he was speaking, and the moment had a testamentary solemnity for him which rallied all his powers. Yet the presence of those

other familiar men promoted expression, for they embodied the indifference which gave a resistant energy to his speech. Not that he looked at Deronda: he seemed to see nothing immediately around him, and if any one had grasped him he would probably not have known it. Again the former words came back to Deronda's mind, – 'You must hope my hopes – see the vision I point to – behold a glory where I behold it.' They came now with gathered pathos. Before him stood, as a living, suffering reality, what hitherto he had only seen as an effort of imagination, which, in its comparative faintness, yet carried a suspicion of being exaggerated: a man steeped in poverty and obscurity, weakened by disease, consciously within the shadow of advancing death, but living an intense life in an invisible past and future, careless of his personal lot, except for its possibly making some obstruction to a conceived good which he would never share except as a brief inward vision – a day afar off, whose sun would never warm him, but into which he threw his soul's desire, with a passion often wanting to the personal motives of healthy youth. It was something more than a grandiose transfiguration of the parental love that toils, renounces, endures, resists the suicidal promptings of despair – all because of the little ones, whose future becomes present to the yearning gaze of anxiety.

All eyes were fixed on Mordecai as he sat down again, and none with unkindness; but it happened that the one who felt the most kindly was the most prompted to speak in opposition. This was the genial and rational Gideon, who also was not without a sense that he was addressing the guest of the evening. He said –

'You have your own way of looking at things, Mordecai, and, as you say, your own way seems to you rational. I know you don't hold with the restoration to Judea by miracle, and so on; but you are as well aware as I am that the subject has been mixed with a heap of nonsense both by Jews and Christians. And as to the connection of our race with Palestine, it has been perverted by superstition till it's as demoralising as the old poor-law. The raff and scum go there to be maintained like able-bodied paupers, and to be taken special care of by the angel Gabriel when they die. It's no use fighting against facts. We must look where they point; that's what I call rationality. The most learned and liberal men among us who are attached to our religion are for clearing our liturgy of all such notions as a literal fulfilment of the prophecies about restoration, and so on. Prune it of a few useless rites and literal interpretations of that sort, and our religion is the simplest of all religions, and makes no barrier, but a union, between us and the rest of the world.'

'As plain as a pike-staff,' said Pash, with an ironical laugh. 'You pluck it up by the roots, strip off the leaves and bark, shave off the knots, and smooth it at top and bottom; put it where you will, it will do no harm, it will never sprout. You may make a handle of it, or you may throw it on the bonfire of scoured rubbish. I don't see why our rubbish is to be held sacred any more than the rubbish of Brahmanism or Bouddhism.'

'No,' said Mordecai, 'no, Pash, because you have lost the heart of the Jew. Community was felt before it was called good. I praise no superstition, I praise the living fountains of enlarging belief. What is growth, completion, development? You began with that question, I apply it to the history of our people. I say that the effect of our separateness will not be completed and have its highest transformation unless our race takes on again the character of a nationality. That is the fulfilment of the religious trust that moulded them into a people, whose life has made half the inspiration of the world. What is it to me that the ten tribes are lost untraceably, or that multitudes of the children of Judah have mixed themselves with the Gentile populations as a river with rivers? Behold our people still! Their skirts spread afar; they are torn and soiled and trodden on; but there is a jewelled breastplate. Let the wealthy men, the monarchs of commerce, the learned in all knowledge, the skilful in all arts, the speakers, the political counsellors, who carry in their veins the Hebrew blood which has maintained its vigour in all climates, and the pliancy of the Hebrew genius for which difficulty means new device – let them say, "we will lift up a standard, we will unite in a labour hard but glorious like that of Moses and Ezra, a labour which shall be a worthy fruit of the long anguish whereby our fathers maintained their separateness, refusing the ease of falsehood." They have wealth enough to redeem the soil from debauched and paupered conquerors; they have the skill of the statesman to devise, the tongue of the orator to persuade. And is there no prophet or poet among us to make the ears of Christian Europe tingle with shame at the hideous obloquy of Christian strife which the Turk gazes at as at the fighting of beasts to which he has lent an arena? There is store of wisdom among us to found a new Jewish polity, grand, simple, just, like the old – a republic where there is equality of protection, an equality which shone like a star on the forehead of our ancient community, and gave it more than the brightness of Western freedom amid the despotisms of the East. Then our race shall have an organic centre, a heart and brain to watch and guide and execute; the outraged Jew shall have a defence in the court of nations, as the outraged Englishman or American. And the world will gain as Israel gains. For there will be a community in the van of the East which carries the culture and the sympathies of every great nation in its bosom; there will be a land set for a halting-place of enmities, a neutral ground for the East as Belgium is for the West. Difficulties? I know there are difficulties. But let the spirit of sublime achievement move in the great among our people, and the work will begin.'

'Ay, we may safely admit that, Mordecai,' said Pash. 'When there are great men on 'Change, and high-flying

professors converted to your doctrine, difficulties will vanish like smoke.'

Deronda, inclined by nature to take the side of those on whom the arrows of scorn were falling, could not help replying to Pash's outfling, and said –

'If we look back to the history of efforts which have made great changes, it is astonishing how many of them seemed hopeless to those who looked on in the beginning. Take what we have all heard and seen something of – the effort after the unity of Italy, which we are sure soon to see accomplished to the very last boundary. Look into Mazzini's account of his first yearning, when he was a boy, after a restored greatness and a new freedom to Italy, and of his first efforts as a young man to rouse the same feelings in other young men, and get them to work towards a united nationality. Almost everything seemed against him: his countrymen were ignorant or indifferent, governments hostile, Europe incredulous. Of course the scorners often seemed wise. Yet you see the prophecy lay with him. As long as there is a remnant of national consciousness, I suppose nobody will deny that there may be a new stirring of memories and hopes which may inspire arduous action.'

'Amen,' said Mordecai, to whom Deronda's words were a cordial. 'What is needed is the leaven – what is needed is the seed of fire. The heritage of Israel is beating in the pulses of millions; it lives in their veins as a power without understanding, like the morning exultation of herds; it is the inborn half of memory, moving as in a dream among writings on the walls, which it sees dimly but cannot divide into speech. Let the torch of visible community be lit! Let the reason of Israel disclose itself in a great outward deed, and let there be another great migration, another choosing of Israel to be a nationality whose members may still stretch to the ends of the earth, even as the sons of England and Germany, whom enterprise carries afar, but who still have a national hearth and a tribunal of national opinion. Will any say "It cannot be"? Baruch Spinoza had not a faithful Jewish heart, though he had sucked the life of his intellect at the breasts of Jewish tradition. He laid bare his father's nakedness and said, "They who scorn him have the higher wisdom." Yet Baruch Spinoza confessed, he saw not why Israel should not again be a chosen nation. Who says that the history and literature of our race are dead? Are they not as living as the history and literature of Greece and Rome, which have inspired revolutions, enkindled the thought of Europe, and made the unrighteous powers tremble? These were an inheritance dug from the tomb. Ours is an inheritance that has never ceased to quiver in millions of human frames.'

Mordecai had stretched his arms upward, and his long thin hands quivered in the air for a moment after he had ceased to speak. Gideon was certainly a little moved, for though there was no long pause before he made a remark in objection, his tone was more mild and deprecatory than before; Pash, meanwhile, pressing his lips together, rubbing his black head with both his hands and wrinkling his brow horizontally, with the expression of one who differs from every speaker, but does not think it worth while to say so. There is a sort of human paste that when it comes near the fire of enthusiasm is only baked into harder shape.

'It may seem well enough on one side to make so much of our memories and inheritance as you do, Mordecai,' said Gideon; 'but there's another side. It isn't all gratitude and harmless glory. Our people have inherited a good deal of hatred. There's a pretty lot of curses still flying about, and stiff settled rancour inherited from the times of persecution. How will you justify keeping one sort of memory and throwing away the other? There are ugly debts standing on both sides.'

'I justify the choice as all other choice is justified,' said Mordecai. 'I cherish nothing for the Jewish nation, I seek nothing for them, but the good which promises good to all the nations. The spirit of our religious life, which is one with our national life, is not hatred of aught but wrong. The Masters have said, an offence against man is worse than an offence against God. But what wonder if there is hatred in the breasts of Jews, who are children of the ignorant and oppressed – what wonder, since there is hatred in the breasts of Christians? Our national life was a growing light. Let the central fire be kindled again, and the light will reach afar. The degraded and scorned of our race will learn to think of their sacred land, not as a place for saintly beggary to await death in loathsome idleness, but as a republic where the Jewish spirit manifests itself in a new order founded on the old, purified, enriched by the experience our greatest sons have gathered from the life of the ages. How long is it? – only two centuries since a vessel carried over the ocean the beginning of the great North American nation. The people grew like meeting waters – they were various in habit and sect – there came a time, a century ago, when they needed a polity, and there were heroes of peace among them. What had they to form a polity with but memories of Europe, corrected by the vision of a better? Let our wise and wealthy show themselves heroes. They have the memories of the East and West, and they have a full vision of a better. A new Persia with a purified religion magnified itself in art and wisdom. So will a new Judaea, poised between East and West – a covenant of reconciliation. Will any say, the prophetic vision of your race has been hopelessly mixed with folly and bigotry; the angel of progress has no message for Judaism – it is a half-buried city for the paid workers to lay open – the waters are rushing by it as a forsaken field? I say that the strongest principle of growth lies in human choice. The sons of Judah have to choose that God

may again choose them. The Messianic time is the time when Israel shall will the planting of the national ensign. The Nile overflowed and rushed onward: the Egyptian could not choose the overflow, but he chose to work and make channels for the fructifying waters, and Egypt became the land of corn. Shall man, whose soul is set in the royalty of discernment and resolve, deny his rank and say, I am an onlooker, ask no choice or purpose of me? That is the blasphemy of this time. The divine principle of our race is action, choice, resolved memory. Let us contradict the blasphemy, and help to will our own better future and the better future of the world – not renounce our higher gift and say, "Let us be as if we were not among the populations;" but choose our full heritage, claim the brotherhood of our nations, and carry into it a new brotherhood with the nations of the Gentiles. The vision is there; it will be fulfilled.'

With the last sentence, which was no more than a loud whisper, Mordecai let his chin sink on his breast and his eyelids fall. No one spoke. It was not the first time that he had insisted on the same ideas, but he was seen to-night in a new phase. The quiet tenacity of his ordinary self differed as much from his present exaltation of mood as a man in private talk, giving reasons for a revolution of which no sign is discernible, differs from one who feels himself an agent in a revolution begun. The dawn of fulfilment brought to his hope by Deronda's presence had wrought Mordecai's conception into a state of impassioned conviction, and he had found strength in his excitement to pour forth the unlocked floods of emotive argument, with a sense of haste as at a crisis which must be seized. But now there had come with the quiescence of fatigue a sort of thankful wonder that he had spoken – a contemplation of his life as a journey which had come at last to this bourne. After a great excitement, the ebbing strength of impulse is apt to leave us in this aloofness from our active self. And in the moments after Mordecai had sunk his head, his mind was wandering along the paths of his youth, and all the hopes which had ended in bringing him hither.

Every one felt that the talk was ended, and the tone of phlegmatic discussion made unseasonable by Mordecai's high-pitched solemnity. It was as if they had come together to hear the blowing of the *shopbar*, and had nothing to do now but to disperse. The movement was unusually general, and in less than ten minutes the room was empty of all except Mordecai and Deronda. 'Good-nights' had been given to Mordecai, but it was evident he had not heard them, for he remained rapt and motionless. Deronda would not disturb this needful rest, but waited for a spontaneous movement.

Chapter Forty-Three

My spirit is too weak; mortality
Weighs heavily on me like unwilling sleep,
And each imagined pinnacle and steep
Of godlike hardship tells me I must die
Like a sick eagle looking at the sky.

– KEATS

After a few minutes the unwonted stillness had penetrated Mordecai's consciousness, and he looked up at Deronda, not in the least with bewilderment and surprise, but with a gaze full of reposing satisfaction. Deronda rose and placed his chair nearer, where there could be no imagined need for raising the voice. Mordecai felt the action as a patient feels the gentleness that eases his pillow. He began to speak in a low tone, as if he were only thinking articulately, not trying to reach an audience.

'In the doctrine of the Cabbala, souls are born again and again in new bodies till they are perfected and purified, and a soul liberated from a worn-out body may join the fellow-soul that needs it, that they may be perfected together, and their earthly work accomplished. Then they will depart from the mortal region, and leave place for new souls to be born out of the store in the eternal bosom. It is the lingering imperfection of the souls already born into the mortal region that hinders the birth of new souls and the preparation of the Messianic time: – thus the mind has given shape to what is hidden, as the shadow of what is known, and has spoken truth, though it were only in parable. When my long-wandering soul is liberated from this weary body, it will join yours, and its work will be perfected.'

Mordecai's pause seemed an appeal which Deronda's feeling would not let him leave unanswered. He tried to make it truthful; but for Mordecai's ear it was inevitably filled with unspoken meanings. He only said –

'Everything I can in conscience do to make your life effective I will do.'

'I know it,' said Mordecai, in the tone of quiet certainty which dispenses with further assurance. 'I heard it. You see it all – you are by my side on the mount of vision, and behold the paths of fulfilment which others deny.'

He was silent a moment or two, and then went on meditatively –

'You will take up my life where it was broken. I feel myself back in that day when my life was broken. The bright morning sun was on the quay – it was at Trieste – the garments of men from all nations shone like jewels – the boats were pushing off – the Greek vessel that would land us at Beyrout was to start in an hour. I was going with a merchant as his clerk and companion. I said, I shall behold the lands and people of the East, and I shall speak with a fuller vision. I breathed then as, you do, without labour; I had the light step and the endurance of youth; I could fast, I could sleep on the hard ground. I had wedded poverty, and I loved my bride – for poverty to me was freedom. My heart exulted as if it had been the heart of Moses ben Maimon, strong with the strength of threescore years, and knowing the work that was to fill them. It was the first time I had been south: the soul within me felt its former sun; and standing on the quay, where the ground I stood on seemed to send forth light, and the shadows had an azure glory as of spirits become visible, I felt myself in the flood of a glorious life, wherein my own small year-counted existence seemed to melt, so that I knew it not; and a great sob arose within me as at the rush of waters that were too strong a bliss. So I stood there awaiting my companion; and I saw him not till he said: "Ezra, I have been to the post and there is your letter." '

'Ezra!' exclaimed Deronda, unable to contain himself.

'Ezra,' repeated Mordecai, affirmatively, engrossed in memory. 'I was expecting a letter; for I wrote continually to my mother. And that sound of my name was like the touch of a wand that recalled me to the body wherefrom I had been released as it were to mingle with the ocean of human existence, free from the pressure of individual bondage. I opened the letter; and the name came again as a cry that would have disturbed me in the bosom of heaven, and made me yearn to reach where that sorrow was. – "Ezra, my son!" '

Mordecai paused again, his imagination arrested by the grasp of that long-past moment. Deronda's mind was almost breathlessly suspended on what was coming. A strange possibility had suddenly presented itself. Mordecai's eyes were cast down in abstracted contemplation, and in a few moments he went on –

'She was a mother of whom it might have come – yea, might have come to be said, "Her children arise up

and call her blessed." In her I understood the meaning of that Master who, perceiving the footsteps of his mother, rose up and said, "The majesty of the Eternal cometh near!" And that letter was her cry from the depths of anguish and desolation – the cry of a mother robbed of her little one. I was her eldest. Death had taken four babes, one after the other. Then came late my little sister, who was more than all the rest the desire of her mother's eyes; and the letter was a piercing cry to me – "Ezra, my son, I am robbed of her. He has taken her away, and left disgrace behind. They will never come again." ' – Here Mordecai lifted his eyes suddenly, laid his hand on Deronda's arm, and said, 'Mine was the lot of Israel. For the sin of the father my soul must go into exile. For the sin of the father the work was broken, and the day of fulfilment delayed. She who bore me was desolate, disgraced, destitute. I turned back. On the instant I turned – her spirit, and the spirit of her fathers, who had worthy Jewish hearts, moved within me, and drew me. God, in whom dwells the universe, was within me as the strength of obedience. I turned and travelled with hardship – to save the scant money which she would need. I left the sunshine, and travelled into freezing cold. In the last stage I spent a night in exposure to cold and snow. And that was the beginning of this slow death.'

Mordecai let his eyes wander again and removed his hand. Deronda resolutely repressed the questions which urged themselves within him. While Mordecai was in this state of emotion, no other confidence must be sought than what came spontaneously: nay, he himself felt a kindred emotion which made him dread his own speech as too momentous.

'But I worked. We were destitute – everything had been seized. And she was ill: the clutch of anguish was too strong for her, and wrought with some lurking disease. At times she could not stand for the beating of her heart, and the images in her brain became as chambers of terror, where she beheld my sister reared in evil. In the dead of night I heard her crying for her child. Then I rose, and we stretched forth our arms together and prayed. We poured forth our souls in desire that Mirah might be delivered from evil.'

'Mirah?' Deronda repeated, wishing to assure himself that his ears had not been deceived by a forecasting imagination. 'Did you say Mirah?'

'That was my little sister's name. After we had prayed for her my mother would rest awhile. It lasted hardly four years, and in the minutes before she died, we were praying the same prayer – I aloud, she silently. Her soul went out upon its wings.'

'Have you never since heard of your sister?' said Deronda, as quietly as he could.

'Never. Never have I heard whether she was delivered according to our prayer. I know not, I know not. Who shall say where the pathways lie? The poisonous will of the wicked is strong. It poisoned my life – it is slowly stifling this breath. Death delivered my mother, and I felt it a blessedness that I was alone in the winters of suffering. But what are the winters now? – they are far off' – here Mordecai again rested his hand on Deronda's arm, and looked at him with that joy of the hectic patient which pierces us to sadness – 'there is nothing to wail in the withering of my body. The work will be the better done. Once I said, the work of this beginning is mine, I am born to do it. Well, I shall do it. I shall live in you. I shall live in you.'

His grasp had become convulsive in its force, and Deronda, agitated as he had never been before – the certainty that this was Mirah's brother suffusing his own strange relation to Mordecai with a new solemnity and tenderness – felt his strong young heart beating faster and his lips paling. He shrank from speech. He feared, in Mordecai's present state of exaltation (already an alarming strain on his feeble frame) to utter a word of revelation about Mirah. He feared to make an answer below that high pitch of expectation which resembled a flash from a dying fire, making watchers fear to see it dying the faster. His dominant impulse was to do as he had once done before: he laid his firm gentle hand on the hand that grasped him. Mordecai's, as if it had a soul of its own – for he was not distinctly willing to do what he did – relaxed its grasp, and turned upward under Deronda's. As the two palms met and pressed each other, Mordecai recovered some sense of his surroundings, and said –

'Let us go now. I cannot talk any longer.'

And in fact they parted at Cohen's door without having spoken to each other again – merely with another pressure of the hands.

Deronda felt a weight on him which was half joy, half anxiety. The joy of finding in Mirah's brother a nature even more than worthy of that relation to her, had the weight of solemnity and sadness: the reunion of brother and sister was in reality the first stage of a supreme parting – like that farewell kiss which resembles greeting, that last glance of love which becomes the sharpest pang of sorrow. Then there was the weight of anxiety about the revelation of the fact on both sides, and the arrangements it would be desirable to make beforehand. I suppose we should all have felt as Deronda did, without sinking into snobbishness or the notion that the primal duties of life demand a morning and an evening suit, that it was an admissible desire to free Mirah's first meeting with her brother from all jarring outward conditions. His own sense of deliverance from the dreaded relationship of the other Cohens, notwithstanding their good nature, made him resolve if possible to keep them in the background for Mirah, until her acquaintance with them would be an unmarred rendering

of gratitude for any kindness they had shown towards her brother. On all accounts he wished to give Mordecai surroundings not only more suited to his frail bodily condition, but less of a hindrance to easy intercourse, even apart from the decisive prospect of Mirah's taking up her abode with her brother, and tending him through the precious remnant of his life. In the heroic drama, great recognitions are not encumbered with these details; and certainly Deronda had as reverential an interest in Mordecai and Mirah as he could have had in the offspring of Agamemnon; but he was caring for destinies still moving in the dim streets of our earthly life, not yet lifted among the constellations, and his task presented itself to him as difficult and delicate, especially in persuading Mordecai to change his abode and habits. Concerning Mirah's feeling and resolve he had no doubt: there would be a complete union of sentiment towards the departed mother, and Mirah would understand her brother's greatness. Yes, greatness: that was the word which Deronda now deliberately chose to signify the impression that Mordecai made on him. He said to himself, perhaps rather defiantly towards the more negative spirit within him, that this man, however erratic some of his interpretations might be – this consumptive Jewish workman in threadbare clothing, lodged by charity, delivering himself to hearers who took his thoughts without attaching more consequences to them than the Flemings to the ethereal chimes ringing above their market-places – had the chief elements of greatness: a mind consciously, energetically moving with the larger march of human destinies, but not the less full of conscience and tender heart for the footsteps that tread near and need a leaning-place; capable of conceiving and choosing a life's task with far-off issues, yet capable of the unapplauded heroism which turns off the road of achievement at the call of the nearer duty whose effect lies within the beatings of the hearts that are close to us, as the hunger of the unfledged bird to the breast of its parent.

Deronda to-night was stirred with the feeling that the brief remnant of this fervid life had become his charge. He had been peculiarly wrought on by what he had seen at the club of the friendly indifference which Mordecai must have gone on encountering. His own experience of the small room that ardour can make for itself in ordinary minds had had the effect of increasing his reserve; and while tolerance was the easiest attitude to him, there was another bent in him also capable of becoming a weakness – the dislike to appear exceptional or to risk an ineffective insistance on his own opinion. But such caution appeared contemptible to him just now, when he for the first time saw in a complete picture and felt as a reality the lives that burn themselves out in solitary enthusiasm: martyrs of obscure circumstance, exiled in the rarity of their own minds, whose deliverances in other ears are no more than a long passionate soliloquy – unless perhaps at last, when they are nearing the invisible shores, signs of recognition and fulfilment may penetrate the cloud of loneliness; or perhaps it may be with them as with the dying Copernicus made to touch the first printed copy of his book when the sense of touch was gone, seeing it only as a dim object through the deepening dusk.

Deronda had been brought near to one of those spiritual exiles, and it was in his nature to feel the relation as a strong claim, nay, to feel his imagination moving without repugnance in the direction of Mordecai's desires. With all his latent objection to schemes only definite in their generality and nebulous in detail – in the poise of his sentiments he felt at one with this man who had made a visionary selection of him: the lines of what may be called their emotional theory touched. He had not the Jewish consciousness, but he had a yearning, grown the stronger for the denial which had been his grievance, after the obligation of avowed filial and social ties. His feeling was ready for difficult obedience. In this way it came that he set about his new task ungrudgingly; and again he thought of Mrs Meyrick as his chief helper. To her first he must make known the discovery of Mirah's brother, and with her he must consult on all preliminaries of bringing the mutually lost together. Happily the best quarter for a consumptive patient did not lie too far off the small house at Chelsea, and the first office Deronda had to perform for this Hebrew prophet who claimed him as a spiritual inheritor, was to get him a healthy lodging. Such is the irony of earthly mixtures, that the heroes have not always had carpets and tea-cups of their own; and, seen through the open window by the mackerel-vendor, may have been invited with some hopefulness to pay three hundred per cent in the form of fourpence. However, Deronda's mind was busy with a prospective arrangement for giving a furnished lodging some faint likeness to a refined home by dismantling his own chambers of his best old books in vellum, his easiest chair, and the bas-reliefs of Milton and Dante.

But was not Mirah to be there? What furniture can give such finish to a room as a tender woman's face? – and is there any harmony of tints that has such stirrings of delight as the sweet modulations of her voice? Here is one good, at least, thought Deronda, that comes to Mordecai from his having fixed his imagination on me. He was recovered a perfect sister, whose affection is waiting for him.

Chapter Forty-Four

Fairy folk a-listening
Hear the seed sprout in the spring,
And for music to their dance
Hear the hedgerows wake from trance,
Sap that trembles into buds
Sending little rhythmic floods
Of fairy sound in fairy ears.
Thus all beauty that appears
Has birth as sound to finer sense
And lighter-clad intelligence.

And Gwendolen? – She was thinking of Deronda much more than he was thinking of her – often wondering what were his ideas 'about things,' and how his life was occupied. But a lap-dog would be necessarily at a loss in framing to itself the motives and adventures of doghood at large; and it was as far from Gwendolen's conception that Deronda's life could be determined by the historical destiny of the Jews, as that he could rise into the air on a brazen horse, and so vanish from her horizon in the form of a twinkling star.

With all the sense of inferiority that had been forced upon her, it was inevitable that she should imagine a larger place for herself in his thoughts than she actually possessed. They must be rather old and wise persons who are not apt to see their own anxiety or elation about themselves reflected in other minds; and Gwendolen, with her youth and inward solitude, may be excused for dwelling on signs of special interest in her shown by the one person who had impressed her with the feeling of submission, and for mistaking the colour and proportion of those signs in the mind of Deronda.

Meanwhile, what would he tell her that she ought to do? 'He said, I must get more interest in others, and more knowledge, and that I must care about the best things – but how am I to begin?' She wondered what books he would tell her to take up to her own room, and recalled the famous writers that she had either not looked into or had found the most unreadable, with a half-smiling wish that she could mischievously ask Deronda if they were not the books called 'medicine for the mind.' Then she repented of her sauciness, and when she was safe from observation carried up a miscellaneous selection – Descartes, Bacon, Locke, Butler, Burke, Guizot – knowing, as a clever young lady of education, that these authors were ornaments of mankind, feeling sure that Deronda had read them, and hoping that by dipping into them all in succession, with her rapid understanding she might get a point of view nearer to his level.

But it was astonishing how little time she found for these vast mental excursions. Constantly she had to be on the scene as Mrs Grandcourt, and to feel herself watched in that part by the exacting eyes of a husband who had found a motive to exercise his tenacity – that of making his marriage answer all the ends he chose, and with the more completeness the more he discerned any opposing will in her. And she herself, whatever rebellion might be going on within her, could not have made up her mind to failure in her representation. No feeling had yet reconciled her for a moment to any act, word, or look that would be a confession to the world; and what she most dreaded in herself was any violent impulse that would make an involuntary confession: it was the will to be silent in every other direction that had thrown the more impetuosity into her confidences towards Deronda, to whom her thought continually turned as a help against herself. Her riding, her hunting, her visiting and receiving of visits, were all performed in a spirit of achievement which served instead of zest and young gladness, so that all round Diplow, in those weeks of the New Year, Mrs Grandcourt was regarded as wearing her honours with triumph.

'She disguises it under an air of taking everything as a matter of course,' said Mrs Arrowpoint. 'A stranger might suppose that she had condescended rather than risen. I always noticed that doubleness in her.'

To her mother most of all Gwendolen was bent on acting complete satisfaction, and poor Mrs Davilow was so far deceived that she took the unexpected distance at which she was kept, in spite of what she felt to be Grandcourt's handsome behaviour in providing for her, as a comparative indifference in her daughter, now that marriage had created new interests. To be fetched to lunch and then to dinner along with the Gascoignes, to be driven back soon after breakfast the next morning, and to have brief calls from Gwendolen in which her husband waited for her outside either on horseback or sitting in the carriage, was all the intercourse allowed

to the mother.

The truth was, that the second time Gwendolen proposed to invite her mother with Mr and Mrs Gascoigne, Grandcourt had at first been silent, and then drawled, 'We can't be having *those people* always. Gascoigne talks too much. Country clergy are always bores – with their confounded fuss about everything.'

That speech was full of foreboding for Gwendolen. To have her mother classed under 'those people' was enough to confirm the previous dread of bringing her too near. Still, she could not give the true reasons – she could not say to her mother, 'Mr Grandcourt wants to recognise you as little as possible; and besides it is better you should not see much of my married life, else you might find out that I am miserable.' So she waived as lightly as she could every allusion to the subject; and when Mrs Davilow again hinted the possibility of her having a house close to Ryelands, Gwendolen said, 'It would not be so nice for you as being near the Rectory here, mamma. We shall perhaps be very little at Ryelands. You would miss my aunt and uncle.'

And all the while this contemptuous veto of her husband's on any intimacy with her family, making her proudly shrink from giving them the aspect of troublesome pensioners, was rousing more inward inclination towards them. She had never felt so kindly towards her uncle, so much disposed to look back on his cheerful, complacent activity and spirit of kind management, even when mistaken, as more of a comfort than the neutral loftiness which was every day chilling her. And here perhaps she was unconsciously finding some of that mental enlargement which it was hard to get from her occasional dashes into difficult authors, who instead of blending themselves with her daily agitations required her to dismiss them.

It was a delightful surprise one day when Mr and Mrs Gascoigne were at Offendene to see Gwendolen ride up without her husband – with the groom only. All, including the four girls and Miss Merry, seated in the dining-room at lunch, could see the welcome approach; and even the elder ones were not without something of Isabel's romantic sense that the beautiful sister on the splendid chesnut, which held its head as if proud to bear her, was a sort of Harriet Byron or Miss Wardour reappearing out of her 'happiness ever after.'

Her uncle went to the door to give her his hand, and she sprang from her horse with an air of alacrity which might well encourage that notion of guaranteed happiness; for Gwendolen was particularly bent to-day on setting her mother's heart at rest, and her unusual sense of freedom in being able to make this visit alone enabled her to bear up under the pressure of painful facts which were urging themselves anew. The seven family kisses were not so tiresome as they used to be.

'Mr Grandcourt is gone out, so I determined to fill up the time by coming to you, mamma,' said Gwendolen, as she laid down her hat and seated herself next to her mother; and then looking at her with a playfully monitory air, 'That is a punishment to you for not wearing better lace on your head. You didn't think I should come and detect you – you dreadfully careless-about-yourself mamma!' She gave a caressing touch to the dear head.

'Scold me, dear,' said Mrs Davilow, her delicate worn face flushing with delight. 'But I wish there was something you could eat after your ride – instead of these scraps. Let Jocosa make you a cup of chocolate in your old way. You used to like that.'

Miss Merry immediately rose and went out, though Gwendolen said, 'Oh no, a piece of bread, or one of those hard biscuits. I can't think about eating. I am come to say good-bye.'

'What! going to Ryelands again?' said Mr Gascoigne.

'No, we are going to town,' said Gwendolen, beginning to break up a piece of bread, but putting no morsel into her mouth.

'It is rather early to go to town,' said Mrs Gascoigne, 'and Mr Grandcourt not in Parliament.'

'Oh, there is only one more day's hunting to be had, and Henleigh has some business in town with lawyers, I think,' said Gwendolen. 'I am very glad. I shall like to go to town.'

'You will see your house in Grosvenor Square,' said Mrs Davilow. She and the girls were devouring with their eyes every movement of their goddess, soon to vanish.

'Yes,' said Gwendolen, in a tone of assent to the interest of that expectation. 'And there is so much to be seen and done in town.'

'I wish, my dear Gwendolen,' said Mr Gascoigne, in a tone of cordial advice, 'that you would use your influence with Mr Grandcourt to induce him to enter Parliament. A man of his position should make his weight felt in politics. The best judges are confident that the ministry will have to appeal to the country on this question of further Reform, and Mr Grandcourt should be ready for the opportunity. I am not quite sure that his opinions and mine accord entirely; I have not heard him express himself very fully. But I don't look at the matter from that point of view. I am thinking of your husband's standing in the country. And he has now come to that stage of life when a man like him should enter into public affairs. A wife has great influence with her husband. Use yours in that direction, my dear.'

The Rector felt that he was acquitting himself of a duty here, and giving something like the aspect of a public benefit to his niece's match. To Gwendolen the whole speech had the flavour of bitter comedy. If she

had been merry, she must have laughed at her uncle's explanation to her that he had not heard Grandcourt express himself very fully on politics. And the wife's great influence! General maxims about husbands and wives seemed now of a precarious usefulness. Gwendolen herself had once believed in her future influence as an omnipotence in managing – she did not know exactly what. But her chief concern at present was to give an answer that would be felt appropriate.

'I should be very glad, uncle. But I think Mr Grandcourt would not like the trouble of an election – at least, unless it could be without his making speeches. I thought candidates always made speeches.'

'Not necessarily – to any great extent,' said Mr Gascoigne. 'A man of position and weight can get on without much of it. A county member need have very little trouble in that way, and both out of the House and in it is liked the better for not being a speechifier. Tell Mr Grandcourt that I say so.'

'Here comes Jocosa with my chocolate after all,' said Gwendolen, escaping from a promise to give information that would certainly have been received in a way inconceivable to the good Rector, who, pushing his chair a little aside from the table and crossing his leg, looked as well as felt like a worthy specimen of a clergyman and magistrate giving experienced advice. Mr Gascoigne had come to the conclusion that Grandcourt was a proud man, but his own self-love, calmed through life by the consciousness of his general value and personal advantages, was not irritable enough to prevent him from hoping the best about his niece's husband because her uncle was kept rather haughtily at a distance. A certain aloofness must be allowed to the representative of an old family; you would not expect him to be on intimate terms even with abstractions. But Mrs Gascoigne was less dispassionate on her husband's account, and felt Grandcourt's haughtiness as something a little blameable in Gwendolen.

'Your uncle and Anna will very likely be in town about Easter,' she said, with a vague sense of expressing a slight discontent. 'Dear Rex hopes to come out with honours and a fellowship, and he wants his father and Anna to meet him in London, that they may be jolly together, as he says. I shouldn't wonder if Lord Brackenshaw invited them, he has been so very kind since he came back to the Castle.'

'I hope my uncle will bring Anna to stay in Grosvenor Square,' said Gwendolen, risking herself so far, for the sake of the present moment, but in reality wishing that she might never be obliged to bring any of her family near Grandcourt again. 'I am very glad of Rex's good fortune.'

'We must not be premature, and rejoice too much beforehand,' said the Rector, to whom this topic was the happiest in the world, and altogether allowable, now that the issue of that little affair about Gwendolen had been so satisfactory. 'Not but that I am in correspondence with impartial judges, who have the highest hopes about my son, as a singularly clear-headed young man. And of his excellent disposition and principle I have had the best evidence.'

'We shall have him a great lawyer some time,' said Mrs Gascoigne.

'How very nice!' said Gwendolen, with a concealed scepticism as to niceness in general, which made the word quite applicable to lawyers.

'Talking of Lord Brackenshaw's kindness,' said Mrs Davilow, 'you don't know how delightful he has been, Gwendolen. He has begged me to consider myself his guest in this house till I can get another that I like – he did it in the most graceful way. But now a house has turned up. Old Mr Jodson is dead, and we can have his house. It is just what I want; small, but with nothing hideous to make you miserable thinking about it. And it is only a mile from the Rectory. You remember the low white house nearly hidden by the trees, as we turn up the lane to the church?'

'Yes, but you have no furniture, poor mamma,' said Gwendolen, in a melancholy tone.

'Oh, I am saving money for that. You know who has made me rather rich, dear,' said Mrs Davilow, laying her hand on Gwendolen's. 'And Jocosa really makes so little do for housekeeping – it is quite wonderful.'

'Oh, please let me go up-stairs with you and arrange my hat, mamma,' said Gwendolen, suddenly putting up her hand to her hair and perhaps creating a desired disarrangement. Her heart was swelling, and she was ready to cry. Her mother *must* have been worse off, if it had not been for Grandcourt.

'I suppose I shall never see all this again,' said Gwendolen, looking round her, as they entered the black and yellow bedroom, and then throwing herself into a chair in front of the glass with a little groan as of bodily fatigue. In the resolve not to cry she had become very pale.

'You are not well, dear?' said Mrs Davilow.

'No; that chocolate has made me sick,' said Gwendolen, putting up her hand to be taken.

'I should be allowed to come to you if you were ill, darling,' said Mrs Davilow, rather timidly, as she pressed the hand to her bosom. Something had made her sure to-day that her child loved her – needed her as much as ever.

'Oh yes,' said Gwendolen, leaning her head against her mother, though speaking as lightly as she could. 'But you know I never am ill. I am as strong as possible; and you must not take to fretting about me, but make yourself as happy as you can with the girls. They are better children to you than I have been, you know.' She

turned up her face with a smile.

'You have always been good, my darling. I remember nothing else.'

'Why, what did I ever do that was good to you, except marry Mr Grandcourt?' said Gwendolen, starting up with a desperate resolve to be playful, and keep no more on the perilous edge of agitation. 'And I should not have done *that* unless it had pleased myself.' She tossed up her chin, and reached her hat.

'God forbid, child! I would not have had you marry for my sake. Your happiness by itself is half mine.'

'Very well,' said Gwendolen, arranging her hat fastidiously, 'then you will please to consider that you are half happy, which is more than I am used to seeing you.' With the last words she again turned with her old playful smile to her mother. 'Now I am ready; but oh, mamma, Mr Grandcourt gives me a quantity of money, and expects me to spend it, and I can't spend it; and you know I can't bear charity children and all that; and here are thirty pounds. I wish the girls would spend it for me on little things for themselves when you go to the new house. Tell them so.' Gwendolen put the notes into her mother's hand and looked away hastily, moving towards the door.

'God bless you, dear,' said Mrs Davilow. 'It will please them so that you should have thought of *them* in particular.'

'Oh, they are troublesome things; but they don't trouble me now,' said Gwendolen, turning and nodding playfully. She hardly understood her own feeling in this act towards her sisters, but at any rate she did not wish it to be taken as anything serious. She was glad to have got out of the bedroom without showing more signs of emotion, and she went through the rest of her visit and all the good-byes with a quiet propriety that made her say to herself sarcastically as she rode away, 'I think I am making a very good Mrs Grandcourt.'

She believed that her husband was gone to Gadsmere that day – had inferred this, as she had long ago inferred who were the inmates of what he had described as 'a dog-hutch of a place in a black country;' and the strange conflict of feeling within her had had the characteristic effect of sending her to Offendene with a tightened resolve – a form of excitement which was native to her.

She wondered at her own contradictions. Why should she feel it bitter to her that Grandcourt showed concern for the beings on whose account she herself was undergoing remorse? Had she not before her marriage inwardly determined to speak and act on their behalf? – and since he had lately implied that he wanted to be in town because he was making arrangements about his will, she ought to have been glad of any sign that he kept a conscience awake towards those at Gadsmere; and yet, now that she was a wife, the sense that Grandcourt was gone to Gadsmere was like red heat near a burn. She had brought on herself this indignity in her own eyes – this humiliation of being doomed to a terrified silence lest her husband should discover with what sort of consciousness she had married him; and as she had said to Deronda, she 'must go on.' After the intensest moments of secret hatred towards this husband who from the very first had cowed her, there always came back the spiritual pressure which made submission inevitable. There was no effort at freedom that would not bring fresh and worse humiliation. Gwendolen could dare nothing except in impulsive action – least of all could she dare premeditatedly a vague future in which the only certain condition was indignity. In spite of remorse, it still seemed the worst result of her marriage that she should in any way make a spectacle of herself; and her humiliation was lightened by her thinking that only Mrs Glasher was aware of the fact which caused it. For Gwendolen had never referred the interview at the Whispering Stones to Lush's agency; her disposition to vague terror investing with shadowy omnipresence any threat of fatal power over her, and so hindering her from imagining plans and channels by which news had been conveyed to the woman who had the poisoning skill of a sorceress. To Gwendolen's mind the secret lay with Mrs Glasher, and there were words in the horrible letter which implied that Mrs Glasher would dread disclosure to the husband, as much as the usurping Mrs Grandcourt.

Something else, too, she thought of as more of a secret from her husband than it really was – namely, that suppressed struggle of desperate rebellion which she herself dreaded. Grandcourt could not indeed fully imagine how things affected Gwendolen: he had no imagination of anything in her but what affected the gratification of his own will; but on this point he had the sensibility which seems like divination. What we see exclusively we are apt to see with some mistake of proportions; and Grandcourt was not likely to be infallible in his judgments concerning this wife who was governed by many shadowy powers, to him non-existent. He magnified her inward resistance, but that did not lessen his satisfaction in the mastery of it.

Chapter Forty-Five

Behold my lady's carriage stop the way,
With powdered lacquey and with champing bay:
She sweeps the matting, treads the crimson stair,
Her arduous function solely 'to be there.'
Like Sirius rising o'er the silent sea,
She hides her heart in lustre loftily.

So the Grandcourts were in Grosvenor Square in time to receive a card for the musical party at Lady Mallinger's, there being reasons of business which made Sir Hugo know beforehand that his ill-beloved nephew was coming up. It was only the third evening after their arrival, and Gwendolen made rather an absent-minded acquaintance with her new ceilings and furniture, preoccupied with the certainty that she was going to speak to Deronda again, and also to see the Miss Lapidoth who had gone through so much, and was 'capable of submitting to anything in the form of duty.' For Gwendolen had remembered nearly every word that Deronda had said about Mirah, and especially that phrase, which she repeated to herself bitterly, having an ill-defined consciousness that her own submission was something very different. She would have been obliged to allow, if any one had said it to her, that what she submitted to could not take the shape of duty, but was submission to a yoke drawn on her by an action she was ashamed of, and worn with a strength of selfish motives that left no weight for duty to carry.

The drawing-rooms in Park Lane, all white, gold, and pale crimson, were agreeably furnished, and not crowded with guests, before Mr and Mrs Grandcourt entered; and more than half an hour of instrumental music was being followed by an interval of movement and chat. Klesmer was there with his wife, and in his generous interest for Mirah he proposed to accompany her singing of Leo's '*O patria mia*,' which he had before recommended her to choose, as more distinctive of her than better known music. He was already at the piano, and Mirah was standing there conspicuously, when Gwendolen, magnificent in her pale green velvet and poisoned diamonds, was ushered to a seat of honour well in view of them. With her long sight and self-command she had the rare power of quickly distinguishing persons and objects on entering a full room, and while turning her glance towards Mirah she did not neglect to exchange a bow and smile with Klesmer as she passed. The smile seemed to each a lightning-flash back on that morning when it had been her ambition to stand as the 'little Jewess' was standing, and survey a grand audience from the higher rank of her talent – instead of which she was one of the ordinary crowd in silk and gems, whose utmost performance it must be to admire or find fault. 'He thinks I am in the right road now,' said the lurking resentment within her.

Gwendolen had not caught sight of Deronda in her passage, and while she was seated acquitting herself in chat with Sir Hugo, she glanced round her with careful ease, bowing a recognition here and there, and fearful lest an anxious-looking exploration in search of Deronda might be observed by her husband, and afterwards rebuked as something 'damnably vulgar.' But all travelling, even that of a slow gradual glance round a room, brings a liability to undesired encounters, and amongst the eyes that met Gwendolen's, forcing her into a slight bow, were those of the 'amateur too fond of Meyerbeer,' Mr Lush, whom Sir Hugo continued to find useful as a half-caste among gentlemen. He was standing near her husband, who, however, turned a shoulder towards him, and was being understood to listen to Lord Pentreath. How was it that at this moment, for the first time, there darted through Gwendolen, like a disagreeable sensation, the idea that this man knew all about her husband's life? He had been banished from her sight, according to her will, and she had been satisfied; he had sunk entirely into the background of her thoughts, screened away from her by the agitating figures that kept up an inward drama in which Lush had no place. Here suddenly he reappeared at her husband's elbow, and there sprang up in her, like an instantaneously fabricated memory in a dream, the sense of his being connected with the secrets that made her wretched. She was conscious of effort in turning her head away from him, trying to continue her wandering survey as if she had seen nothing of more consequence than the picture on the wall, till she discovered Deronda. But he was not looking towards her, and she withdrew her eyes from him, without having got any recognition, consoling herself with the assurance that he must have seen her come in. In fact, he was standing not far from the door with Hans Meyrick, whom he had been careful to bring into Lady Mallinger's list. They were both a little more anxious than was comfortable

lest Mirah should not be heard to advantage. Deronda even felt himself on the brink of betraying emotion, Mirah's presence now being linked with crowding images of what had gone before and was to come after – all centring in the brother whom he was soon to reveal to her; and he had escaped as soon as he could from the side of Lady Pentreath, who had said in her violoncello voice –

'Well, your Jewess is pretty – there's no denying that. But where is her Jewish impudence? She looks as demure as a nun. I suppose she learned that on the stage.'

He was beginning to feel on Mirah's behalf something of what he had felt for himself in his seraphic boyish time, when Sir Hugo asked him if he would like to be a great singer – an indignant dislike to her being remarked on in a free and easy way, as if she were an imported commodity disdainfully paid for by the fashionable public; and he winced the more because Mordecai, he knew, would feel that the name 'Jewess' was taken as a sort of stamp like the lettering of Chinese silk. In this susceptible mood he saw the Grandcourts enter, and was immediately appealed to by Hans about 'that Vandyke duchess of a beauty.' Pray excuse Deronda that in this moment he felt a transient renewal of his first repulsion from Gwendolen, as if she and her beauty and her failings were to blame for the undervaluing of Mirah as a woman – a feeling something like class animosity, which affection for what is not fully recognised by others, whether in persons or in poetry, rarely allows us to escape. To Hans admiring Gwendolen with his habitual hyperbole, he answered, with a sarcasm that was not quite good-humoured –

'I thought you could admire no style of woman but your Berenice.'

'That is the style I worship – not admire,' said Hans. 'Other styles of woman I might make myself wicked for, but for Berenice I could make myself – well, pretty good, which is something much more difficult.'

'Hush!' said Deronda, under the pretext that the singing was going to begin. He was not so delighted with the answer as might have been expected, and was relieved by Hans's movement to a more advanced spot.

Deronda had never before heard Mirah sing '*O patria mia*.' He knew well Leopardi's fine Ode to Italy (when Italy sat like a disconsolate mother in chains, hiding her face on her knees and weeping), and the few selected words were filled for him with the grandeur of the whole, which seemed to breathe as inspiration through the music. Mirah singing this, made Mordecai more than ever one presence with her. Certain words not included in the song nevertheless rang within Deronda as harmonies from one invisible –

'Non ti difende
Nessun de' tuoi? L'armi, qua l'armi: io solo
Combatterò, procomberò sol io'[*]

they seemed the very voice of that heroic passion which is falsely said to devote itself in vain when it achieves the godlike end of manifesting unselfish love. And that passion was present to Deronda now as the vivid image of a man dying helplessly away from the possibility of battle.

Mirah was equal to his wishes. While the general applause was sounding, Klesmer gave a more valued testimony, audible to her only – 'Good, good – the crescendo better than before.' But her chief anxiety was to know that she had satisfied Mr Deronda: any failure on her part this evening would have pained her as an especial injury to him. Of course all her prospects were due to what he had done for her; still this occasion of singing in the house that was his home brought a peculiar demand. She looked towards him in the distance, and he could see that she did; but he remained where he was, and watched the stream of emulous admirers closing round her, till presently they parted to make way for Gwendolen, who was taken up to be introduced by Mrs Klesmer. Easier now about 'the little Jewess,' Daniel relented towards poor Gwendolen in her splendour, and his memory went back, with some penitence for his momentary hardness, over all the signs and confessions that she too needed a rescue, and one much more difficult than that of the wanderer by the river – a rescue for which he felt himself helpless. The silent question – 'But is it not cowardly to make that a reason for turning away?' was the form in which he framed his resolve to go near her on the first opportunity, and show his regard for her past confidence, in spite of Sir Hugo's unwelcome hints.

Klesmer, having risen to Gwendolen as she approached, and being included by her in the opening conversation with Mirah, continued near them a little while, looking down with a smile, which was rather in his eyes than on his lips, at the piquant contrast of the two charming young creatures seated on the red divan. The solicitude seemed to be all on the side of the splendid one.

'You must let me say how much I am obliged to you,' said Gwendolen. 'I had heard from Mr Deronda that I should have a great treat in your singing, but I was too ignorant to imagine how great.'

'You are very good to say so,' answered Mirah, her mind chiefly occupied in contemplating Gwendolen. It was like a new kind of stage-experience to her to be close to genuine grand ladies with genuine brilliants and complexions, and they impressed her vaguely as coming out of some unknown drama, in which their parts perhaps got more tragic as they went on.

'We shall all want to learn of you – I, at least,' said Gwendolen. 'I sing very badly, as Herr Klesmer will tell you' – here she glanced upward to that higher power rather archly, and continued – 'but I have been rebuked

for not liking to be middling, since I can be nothing more. I think that is a different doctrine from yours?' She was still looking at Klesmer, who said quickly –

'Not if it means that it would be worth while for you to study further, and for Miss Lapidoth to have the pleasure of helping you.' With that he moved away, and Mirah, taking everything with *naïve* seriousness, said –

'If you think I could teach you, I shall be very glad. I am anxious to teach, but I have only just begun. If I do it well, it must be by remembering how my master taught me.'

Gwendolen was in reality too uncertain about herself to be prepared for this simple promptitude of Mirah's, and in her wish to change the subject, said, with some lapse from the good taste of her first address –

'You have not been long in London, I think? – but you were perhaps introduced to Mr Deronda abroad?'

'No,' said Mirah; 'I never saw him before I came to England in the summer.'

'But he has seen you often and heard you sing a great deal, has he not?' said Gwendolen, led on partly by the wish to hear anything about Deronda, and partly by the awkwardness which besets the readiest person in carrying on a dialogue when empty of matter. 'He spoke of you to me with the highest praise. He seemed to know you quite well.'

'Oh, I was poor and needed help,' said Mirah, in a new tone of feeling, 'and Mr Deronda has given me the best friends in the world. That is the only way he came to know anything about me – because he was sorry for me. I had no friends when I came. I was in distress. I owe everything to him.'

Poor Gwendolen, who had wanted to be a struggling artist herself, could nevertheless not escape the impression that a mode of inquiry which would have been rather rude towards herself was an amiable condescension to this Jewess who was ready to give her lessons. The only effect on Mirah, as always on any mention of Deronda, was to stir reverential gratitude and anxiety that she should be understood to have the deepest obligation to him.

But both he and Hans, who were noticing the pair from a distance, would have felt rather indignant if they had known that the conversation had led up to Mirah's representation of herself in this light of neediness. In the movement that prompted her, however, there was an exquisite delicacy, which perhaps she could not have stated explicitly – the feeling that she ought not to allow any one to assume in Deronda a relation of more equality or less generous interest towards her than actually existed. Her answer was delightful to Gwendolen: she thought of nothing but the ready compassion which in another form she had trusted in and found for herself; and on the signals that Klesmer was about to play she moved away in much content, entirely without presentiment that this Jewish *protégée* would ever make a more important difference in her life than the possible improvement of her singing – if the leisure and spirits of a Mrs Grandcourt would allow of other lessons than such as the world was giving her at rather a high charge.

With her wonted alternation from resolute care of appearances to some rash indulgence of an impulse, she chose, under the pretext of getting farther from the instrument, not to go again to her former seat, but placed herself on a settee where she could only have one neighbour. She was nearer to Deronda than before: was it surprising that he came up in time to shake hands before the music began – then, that after he had stood a little while by the elbow of the settee at the empty end, the torrent-like confluences of bass and treble seemed, like a convulsion of nature, to cast the conduct of petty mortals into insignificance, and to warrant his sitting down?

But when at the end of Klesmer's playing there came the outburst of talk under which Gwendolen had hoped to speak as she would to Deronda, she observed that Mr Lush was within hearing, leaning against the wall close by them. She could not help her flush of anger, but she tried to have only an air of polite indifference in saying –

'Miss Lapidoth is everything you described her to be.'

'You have been very quick in discovering that,' said Deronda, ironically.

'I have not found out all the excellences you spoke of – I don't mean that,' said Gwendolen; 'but I think her singing is charming, and herself too. Her face is lovely – not in the least common; and she is such a complete little person. I should think she will be a great success.'

This speech was grating to Deronda, and he would not answer it, but looked gravely before him. She knew that he was displeased with her, and she was getting so impatient under the neighbourhood of Mr Lush, which prevented her from saying any word she wanted to say, that she meditated some desperate step to get rid of it, and remained silent too. That constraint seemed to last a long while, neither Gwendolen nor Deronda looking at the other, till Lush slowly relieved the wall of his weight, and joined some one at a distance.

Gwendolen immediately said, 'You despise me for talking artificially.'

'No,' said Deronda, looking at her coolly; 'I think that is quite excusable sometimes. But I did not think what you were last saying was altogether artificial.'

'There was something in it that displeased you,' said Gwendolen. 'What was it?'

‘It is impossible to explain such things,’ said Deronda. ‘One can never communicate niceties of feeling about words and manner.’

‘You think I am shut out from understanding them,’ said Gwendolen, with a slight tremor in her voice, which she was trying to conquer. ‘Have I shown myself so very dense to everything you have said?’ There was an indescribable look of suppressed tears in her eyes, which were turned on him.

‘Not at all,’ said Deronda, with some softening of voice. ‘But experience differs for different people. We don’t all wince at the same things. I have had plenty of proof that you are not dense.’ He smiled at her.

‘But one may feel things and not be able to do anything better for all that,’ said Gwendolen, not smiling in return – the distance to which Deronda’s words seemed to throw her chilling her too much. ‘I begin to think we can only get better by having people about us who raise good feelings. You must not be surprised at anything in me. I think it is too late for me to alter. I don’t know how to set about being wise, as you told me to be.’

‘I seldom find I do any good by my preaching. I might as well have kept from meddling,’ said Deronda, thinking rather sadly that his interference about that unfortunate necklace might end in nothing but an added pain to him in seeing her after all hardened to another sort of gambling than roulette.

‘Don’t say that,’ said Gwendolen, hurriedly, feeling that this might be her only chance of getting the words uttered, and dreading the increase of her own agitation. ‘If you despair of me, I shall despair. Your saying that I should not go on being selfish and ignorant has been some strength to me. If you say you wish you had not meddled – that means, you despair of me and forsake me. And then you will decide for me that I shall not be good. It is you who will decide; because you might have made me different by keeping as near to me as you could, and believing in me.’

She had not been looking at him as she spoke, but at the handle of the fan which she held closed. With the last words she rose and left him, returning to her former place, which had been left vacant; while every one was settling into quietude in expectation of Mirah’s voice, which presently, with that wonderful, searching quality of subdued song in which the melody seems simply an effect of the emotion, gave forth, *Per pietà non dirmi addio*.

In Deronda’s ear the strain was for the moment a continuance of Gwendolen’s pleading – a painful urging of something vague and difficult, irreconcilable with pressing conditions, and yet cruel to resist. However strange the mixture in her of a resolute pride and a precocious air of knowing the world, with a precipitate, guileless indiscretion, he was quite sure now that the mixture existed. Sir Hugo’s hints had made him alive to dangers that his own disposition might have neglected; but that Gwendolen’s reliance on him was unvisited by any dream of his being a man who could misinterpret her was as manifest as morning, and made an appeal which wrestled with his sense of present dangers, and with his foreboding of a growing incompatible claim on him in her mind. There was a foreshadowing of some painful collision: on the one side the grasp of Mordecai’s dying hand on him, with all the ideals and prospects it aroused; on the other this fair creature in silk and gems, with her hidden wound and her self-dread, making a trustful effort to lean and find herself sustained. It was as if he had a vision of himself besought with outstretched arms and cries, while he was caught by the waves and compelled to mount the vessel bound for a far-off coast. That was the strain of excited feeling in him that went along with the notes of Mirah’s song; but when it ceased he moved from his seat with the reflection that he had been falling into an exaggeration of his own importance, and a ridiculous readiness to accept Gwendolen’s view of himself, as if he could really have any decisive power over her.

‘What an enviable fellow you are,’ said Hans to him, ‘sitting on a sofa with that young duchess, and having an interesting quarrel with her!’

‘Quarrel with her?’ repeated Deronda, rather uncomfortably.

‘Oh, about theology, of course; nothing personal. But she told you what you ought to think, and then left you with a grand air which was admirable. Is she an Antinomian? – if so, tell her I am an Antinomian painter, and introduce me. I should like to paint her and her husband. He has the sort of handsome *physique* that the Duke ought to have in *Lucrezia Borgia* – if it could go with a fine baritone, which it can’t.’

Deronda devoutly hoped that Hans’s account of the impression his dialogue with Gwendolen had made on a distant beholder was no more than a bit of fantastic representation, such as was common with him.

And Gwendolen was not without her after-thoughts that her husband’s eyes might have been on her, extracting something to reprove – some offence against her dignity as his wife; her consciousness telling her that she had not kept up the perfect air of equability in public which was her own ideal. But Grandcourt made no observation on her behaviour. All he said as they were driving home was –

‘Lush will dine with us among the other people to-morrow. You will treat him civilly.’

Gwendolen’s heart began to beat violently. The words that she wanted to utter, as one wants to return a blow, were, ‘You are breaking your promise to me – the first promise you made me.’ But she dared not utter them. She was as frightened at a quarrel as if she had foreseen that it would end with throttling fingers on her

neck. After a pause, she said in the tone rather of defeat than resentment –

'I thought you did not intend him to frequent the house again.'

'I want him just now. He is useful to me; and he must be treated civilly.'

Silence. There may come a moment when even an excellent husband who has dropt smoking under more or less of a pledge during courtship, for the first time will introduce his cigar-smoke between himself and his wife, with the tacit understanding that she will have to put up with it. Mr Lush was, so to speak, a very large cigar.

If these are the sort of lovers' vows at which Jove laughs, he must have a merry time of it.

Chapter Forty-Six

> If any one should importune me to give a reason why I loved him, I feel it could no otherwise be expressed than by making answer, 'Because it was he; because it was I.' There is, beyond what I am able to say, I know not what inexplicable and inevitable power that brought on this union.
>
> – MONTAIGNE: *On Friendship*

The time had come to prepare Mordecai for the revelation of the restored sister and for the change of abode which was desirable before Mirah's meeting with her brother. Mrs Meyrick, to whom Deronda had confided everything except Mordecai's peculiar relation to himself, had been active in helping him to find a suitable lodging in Brompton, not many minutes' walk from her own house, so that the brother and sister would be within reach of her motherly care. Her happy mixture of Scottish caution with her Scottish fervour and Gallic liveliness had enabled her to keep the secret close from the girls as well as from Hans, any betrayal to them being likely to reach Mirah in some way that would raise an agitating suspicion, and spoil the important opening of that work which was to secure her independence, as we rather arbitrarily call one of the more arduous and dignified forms of our dependence. And both Mrs Meyrick and Deronda had more reasons than they could have expressed for desiring that Mirah should be able to maintain herself. Perhaps 'the little mother' was rather helped in her secrecy by some dubiousness in her sentiment about the remarkable brother described to her; and certainly, if she felt any joy and anticipatory admiration, it was due to her faith in Deronda's judgment. The consumption was a sorrowful fact that appealed to her tenderness; but how was she to be very glad of an enthusiasm which, to tell the truth, she could only contemplate as Jewish pertinacity, and as rather an undesirable introduction among them all of a man whose conversation would not be more modern and encouraging than that of Scott's Covenanters? Her mind was anything but prosaic, and she had her soberer share of Mab's delight in the romance of Mirah's story and of her abode with them; but the romantic or unusual in real life requires some adaptation. We sit up at night to read about Sakya-Mouni, Saint Francis, or Oliver Cromwell; but whether we should be glad for any one at all like them to call on us the next morning, still more, to reveal himself as a new relation, is quite another affair. Besides, Mrs Meyrick had hoped, as her children did, that the intensity of Mirah's feeling about Judaism would slowly subside, and be merged in the gradually deepening current of loving interchange with her new friends. In fact, her secret favourite continuation of the romance had been no discovery of Jewish relations, but something much more favourable to the hopes she discerned in Hans. And now – here was a brother who would dip Mirah's mind over again in the deepest dye of Jewish sentiment. She could not help saying to Deronda –

'I am as glad as you are that the pawnbroker is not her brother: there are Ezras and Ezras in the world; and really it is a comfort to think that all Jews are not like those shopkeepers who *will not* let you get out of their shops; and besides, what he said to you about his mother and sister makes me bless him. I am sure he's good. But I never did like anything fanatical. I suppose I heard a little too much preaching in my youth, and lost my palate for it.'

'I don't think you will find that Mordecai obtrudes any preaching,' said Deronda. 'He is not what I should call fanatical. I call a man fanatical when his enthusiasm is narrow and hoodwinked, so that he has no sense of proportions, and becomes unjust and unsympathetic to men who are out of his own track. Mordecai is an enthusiast: I should like to keep that word for the highest order of minds – those who care supremely for grand and general benefits to mankind. He is not a strictly orthodox Jew, and is full of allowances for others: his conformity in many things is an allowance for the condition of other Jews. The people he lives with are as fond of him as possible, and they can't in the least understand his ideas.'

'Oh, well, I can live up to the level of the pawnbroker's mother, and like him for what I see to be good in him; and for what I don't see the merits of I will take your word. According to your definition, I suppose one might be fanatical in worshipping common-sense; for my husband used to say the world would be a poor place if there were nothing but common-sense in it. However, Mirah's brother will have good bedding – that I have taken care of; and I shall have this extra window pasted up with paper to prevent draughts.' (The conversation was taking place in the destined lodging.) 'It is a comfort to think that the people of the house are no strangers to me – no hypocritical harpies. And when the children know, we shall be able to make the

rooms much prettier.'

'The next stage of the affair is to tell all to Mordecai, and get him to move – which may be a more difficult business,' said Deronda.

'And will you tell Mirah before I say anything to the children?' said Mrs Meyrick. But Deronda hesitated, and she went on in a tone of persuasive deliberation – 'No, I think not. Let me tell Hans and the girls the evening before, and they will be away the next morning.'

'Yes, that will be best. But do justice to my account of Mordecai – or Ezra, as I suppose Mirah will wish to call him: don't assist their imagination by referring to Habakkuk Mucklewrath,' said Deronda, smiling, – Mrs Meyrick herself having used the comparison of the Covenanters.

'Trust me, trust me,' said the little mother. 'I shall have to persuade them so hard to be glad, that I shall convert myself. When I am frightened I find it a good thing to have somebody to be angry with for not being brave: it warms the blood.'

Deronda might have been more argumentative or persuasive about the view to be taken of Mirah's brother, if he had been less anxiously preoccupied with the more important task immediately before him, which he desired to acquit himself of without wounding the Cohens. Mordecai, by a memorable answer, had made it evident that he would be keenly alive to any inadvertence in relation to their feelings. In the interval, he had been meeting Mordecai at the *Hand and Banner*, but now after due reflection he wrote to him saying that he had particular reasons for wishing to see him in his own home the next evening, and would beg to sit with him in his workroom for an hour, if the Cohens would not regard it as an intrusion. He would call with the understanding that if there were any objection, Mordecai would accompany him elsewhere. Deronda hoped in this way to create a little expectation that would have a preparatory effect.

He was received with the usual friendliness, some additional costume in the women and children, and in all the elders a slight air of wondering which even in Cohen was not allowed to pass the bounds of silence – the guest's transactions with Mordecai being a sort of mystery which he was rather proud to think lay outside the sphere of light which enclosed his own understanding. But when Deronda said, 'I suppose Mordecai is at home and expecting me,' Jacob, who had profited by the family remarks, went up to his knee and said, 'What do you want to talk to Mordecai about?'

'Something that is very interesting to him,' said Deronda, pinching the lad's ear, 'but that you can't understand.'

'Can you say this?' said Jacob, immediately giving forth a string of his rote-learned Hebrew verses with a wonderful mixture of the throaty and the nasal, and nodding his small head at his hearer, with a sense of giving formidable evidence which might rather alter their mutual position.

'No, really,' said Deronda, keeping grave; 'I can't say anything like it.'

'I thought not,' said Jacob, performing a dance of triumph with his small scarlet legs, while he took various objects out of the deep pockets of his knickerbockers and returned them thither, as a slight hint of his resources; after which running to the door of the work-room, he opened it wide, set his back against it, and said, 'Mordecai, here's the young swell' – a copying of his father's phrase which seemed to him well fitted to cap the recitation of Hebrew.

He was called back with hushes by mother and grandmother, and Deronda, entering and closing the door behind him, saw that a bit of carpet had been laid down, a chair placed, and the fire and lights attended to, in sign of the Cohens' respect. As Mordecai rose to greet him, Deronda was struck with the air of solemn expectation in his face, such as would have seemed perfectly natural if his letter had declared that some revelation was to be made about the lost sister. Neither of them spoke, till Deronda, with his usual tenderness of manner, had drawn the vacant chair from the opposite side of the hearth and had seated himself near to Mordecai, who then said, in a tone of fervid certainty –

'You are come to tell me something that my soul longs for.'

'It is true that I have something very weighty to tell you – something, I trust, that you will rejoice in,' said Deronda, on his guard against the probability that Mordecai had been preparing himself for something quite different from the fact.

'It is all revealed – it is made clear to you,' said Mordecai, more eagerly, leaning forward with clasped hands. 'You are even as my brother that sucked the breasts of my mother – the heritage is yours – there is no doubt to divide us.'

'I have learned nothing new about myself,' said Deronda. The disappointment was inevitable: it was better not to let the feeling be strained longer in a mistaken hope.

Mordecai sank back in his chair, unable for the moment to care what was really coming. The whole day his mind had been in a state of tension towards one fulfilment. The reaction was sickening, and he closed his eyes.

'Except,' Deronda went on gently after a pause, – 'except that I had really some time ago come into another

sort of hidden connection with you, besides what you have spoken of as existing in your own feeling.'

The eyes were not opened, but there was a fluttering in the lids.

'I had made the acquaintance of one in whom you are interested.'

Mordecai opened his eyes and fixed them in a quiet gaze on Deronda: the former painful check repressed all activity of conjecture.

'One who is closely related to your departed mother,' Deronda went on, wishing to make the disclosure gradual; but noticing a shrinking movement in Mordecai, he added – 'whom she and you held dear above all others.'

Mordecai, with a sudden start, laid a spasmodic grasp on Deronda's wrist; there was a great terror in him. And Deronda divined it. A tremor was perceptible in his clear tones as he said –

'What was prayed for has come to pass: Mirah has been delivered from evil.'

Mordecai's grasp relaxed a little, but he was panting with a sort of tearless sob.

Deronda went on: 'Your sister is worthy of the mother you honoured.'

He waited there, and Mordecai, throwing himself backward in his chair, again closed his eyes, uttering himself almost inaudibly for some minutes in Hebrew, and then subsiding into a happy-looking silence. Deronda, watching the expression in his uplifted face, could have imagined that he was speaking with some beloved object: there was a new suffused sweetness, something like that on the faces of the beautiful dead. For the first time Deronda thought he discerned a family resemblance to Mirah.

Presently, when Mordecai was ready to listen, the rest was told. But in accounting for Mirah's flight he made the statements about the father's conduct as vague as he could, and threw the emphasis on her yearning to come to England as the place where she might find her mother. Also he kept back the fact of Mirah's intention to drown herself, and his own part in rescuing her; merely describing the home she had found with friends of his, whose interest in her and efforts for her he had shared. What he dwelt on finally was Mirah's feeling about her mother and brother; and in relation to this he tried to give every detail.

'It was in search of them,' said Deronda, smiling, 'that I turned into this house: the name Ezra Cohen was just then the most interesting name in the world to me. I confess I had a fear for a long while. Perhaps you will forgive me now for having asked you that question about the elder Mrs Cohen's daughter. I cared very much what I should find Mirah's friends to be. But I had found a brother worthy of her when I knew that her Ezra was disguised under the name of Mordecai.'

'Mordecai is really my name – Ezra Mordecai Cohen.'

'Is there any kinship between this family and yours?' said Deronda.

'Only the kinship of Israel. My soul clings to these people, who have sheltered me and given me succour out of the affection that abides in Jewish hearts, as a sweet odour in things long crushed and hidden from the outer air. It is good for me to bear with their ignorance and be bound to them in gratitude, that I may keep in mind the spiritual poverty of the Jewish millions, and not put impatient knowledge in the stead of loving wisdom.'

'But you don't feel bound to continue with them now there is a closer tie to draw you?' said Deronda, not without fear that he might find an obstacle to overcome. 'It seems to me right now – is it not? – that you should live with your sister; and I have prepared a home to take you to in the neighbourhood of her friends, that she may join you there. Pray grant me this wish. It will enable me to be with you often in the hours when Mirah is obliged to leave you. That is my selfish reason. But the chief reason is, that Mirah will desire to watch over you, and that you ought to give to her the guardianship of a brother's presence. You shall have books about you. I shall want to learn of you, and to take you out to see the river and trees. And you will have the rest and comfort that you will be more and more in need of – nay, that I need for you. This is the claim I make on you, now that we have found each other.'

Deronda spoke in a tone of earnest affectionate pleading, such as he might have used to a venerated elder brother. Mordecai's eyes were fixed on him with a listening contemplation, and he was silent for a little while after Deronda had ceased to speak. Then he said, with an almost reproachful emphasis –

'And you would have me hold it doubtful whether you were born a Jew! Have we not from the first touched each other with invisible fibres – have we not quivered together like the leaves from a common stem with stirrings from a common root? I know what I am outwardly – I am one among the crowd of poor – I am stricken, I am dying. But our souls know each other. They gazed in silence as those who have long been parted and meet again, but when they found voice they were assured, and all their speech is understanding. The life of Israel is in your veins.'

Deronda sat perfectly still, but felt his face tingling. It was impossible either to deny or assent. He waited, hoping that Mordecai would presently give him a more direct answer. And after a pause of meditation he did say firmly –

'What you wish of me I will do. And our mother – may the blessing of the Eternal be with her in our souls! –

would have wished it too. I will accept what your loving-kindness has prepared, and Mirah's home shall be mine.' He paused a moment, and then added in a more melancholy tone, 'But I shall grieve to part from these parents and the little ones. You must tell them, for my heart would fail me.'

'I felt that you would want me to tell them. Shall we go now at once?' said Deronda, much relieved by this unwavering compliance.

'Yes; let us not defer it. It must be done,' said Mordecai, rising with the air of a man who has to perform a painful duty. Then came, as an afterthought, 'But do not dwell on my sister more than is needful.'

When they entered the parlour he said to the alert Jacob, 'Ask your father to come, and tell Sarah to mind the shop. My friend has something to say,' he continued, turning to the elder Mrs Cohen. It seemed part of Mordecai's eccentricity that he should call this gentleman his friend; and the two women tried to show their better manners by warm politeness in begging Deronda to seat himself in the best place.

When Cohen entered with a pen behind his ear, he rubbed his hands and said with loud satisfaction, 'Well, sir! I'm glad you're doing us the honour to join our family party again. We are pretty comfortable, I think.'

He looked round with shiny gladness. And when all were seated on the hearth the scene was worth peeping in upon: on one side Baby under her scarlet quilt in the corner being rocked by the young mother, and Adelaide Rebekah seated on the grandmother's knee; on the other, Jacob between his father's legs; while the two markedly different figures of Deronda and Mordecai were in the middle – Mordecai a little backward in the shade, anxious to conceal his agitated susceptibility to what was going on around him. The chief light came from the fire, which brought out the rich colour on a depth of shadow, and seemed to turn into speech the dark gems of eyes that looked at each other kindly.

'I have just been telling Mordecai of an event that makes a great change in his life,' Deronda began, 'but I hope you will agree with me that it is a joyful one. Since he thinks of you as his best friends, he wishes me to tell you for him at once.'

'Relations with money, sir?' burst in Cohen, feeling a power of divination which it was a pity to nullify by waiting for the fact.

'No; not exactly,' said Deronda, smiling. 'But a very precious relation wishes to be reunited to him – a very good and lovely young sister, who will care for his comfort in every way.'

'Married, sir?'

'No, not married.'

'But with a maintenance?'

'With talents which will secure her a maintenance. A home is already provided for Mordecai.'

There was silence for a moment or two before the grandmother said in a wailing tone –

'Well, well! and so you're going away from us, Mordecai.'

'And where there's no children as there is here,' said the mother, catching the wail.

'No Jacob, and no Adelaide, and no Eugenie!' wailed the grandmother again.

'Ay, ay, Jacob's learning 'ill all wear out of him. He must go to school. It'll be hard times for Jacob,' said Cohen, in a tone of decision.

In the wide-open ears of Jacob his father's words sounded like a doom, giving an awful finish to the dirge-like effect of the whole announcement. His face had been gathering a wondering incredulous sorrow at the notion of Mordecai's going away: he was unable to imagine the change as anything lasting; but at the mention of 'hard times for Jacob' there was no further suspense of feeling, and he broke forth in loud lamentation. Adelaide Rebekah always cried when her brother cried, and now began to howl with astonishing suddenness, whereupon baby awaking contributed angry screams, and required to be taken out of the cradle. A great deal of hushing was necessary, and Mordecai, feeling the cries pierce him, put out his arms to Jacob, who in the midst of his tears and sobs was turning his head right and left for general observation. His father, who had been saying, 'Never mind, old man; you shall go to the riders,' now released him, and he went to Mordecai, who clasped him, and laid his cheek on the little black head without speaking. But Cohen, sensible that the master of the family must make some apology for all this weakness, and that the occasion called for a speech, addressed Deronda with some elevation of pitch, squaring his elbows and resting a hand on each knee: –

'It's not as we're the people to grudge anybody's good luck, sir, or the portion of their cup being made fuller, as I may say. I'm not an envious man, and if anybody offered to set up Mordecai in a shop of my sort two doors lower down, *I* shouldn't make wry faces about it. I'm not one of them that had need have a poor opinion of themselves, and be frightened at anybody else getting a chance. If I'm offal, let a wise man come and tell me, for I've never heard it yet. And in point of business, I'm not a class of goods to be in danger. If anybody takes to rolling me, I can pack myself up like a caterpillar, and find my feet when I'm let alone. And though, as I may say, you're taking some of our good works from us, which is a property bearing interest, I'm not saying but we can afford that, though my mother and my wife had the good will to wish and do for Mordecai to the last; and a Jew must not be like a servant who works for reward – though I see nothing

against a reward if I can get it. And as to the extra outlay in schooling, I'm neither poor nor greedy – I wouldn't hang myself for sixpence, nor half a crown neither. But the truth of it is, the women and children are fond of Mordecai. You may partly see how it is, sir, by your own sense. A Jewish man is bound to thank God, day by day, that he was not made a woman; but a woman has to thank God that He has made her according to His will. And we all know what He has made her – a child-bearing, tender-hearted thing is the woman of our people. Her children are mostly stout, as I think you'll say Addy's are, and she's not mushy, but her heart is tender. So you must excuse present company, sir, for not being glad all at once. And as to this young lady – for by what you say "young lady" is the proper term' – Cohen here threw some additional emphasis into his look and tone – 'we shall all be glad for Mordecai's sake by-and-by, when we cast up our accounts and see where we are.'

Before Deronda could summon any answer to this oddly mixed speech, Mordecai exclaimed –

'Friends, friends! For food and raiment and shelter I would not have sought better than you have given me. You have sweetened the morsel with love; and what I thought of as a joy that would be left to me even in the last months of my waning strength was to go on teaching the lad. But now I am as one who had clad himself beforehand in his shroud, and used himself to making the grave his bed, when the divine command sounded in his ears, "Arise, and go forth; the night is not yet come." For no light matter would I have turned away from your kindness to take another's. But it has been taught us, as you know, that *the reward of one duty is the power to fulfil another* – so said Ben Azai. You have made your duty to one of the poor among your brethren a joy to you and me; and your reward shall be that you will not rest without the joy of like deeds in the time to come. And may not Jacob come and visit me?'

Mordecai had turned with this question to Deronda, who said –

'Surely that can be managed. It is no further than Brompton.'

Jacob, who had been gradually calmed by the need to hear what was going forward, began now to see some daylight on the future, the word 'visit' having the lively charm of cakes and general relaxation at his grandfather's, the dealer in knives. He danced away from Mordecai, and took up a station of survey in the middle of the hearth with his hands in his knickerbockers.

'Well,' said the grandmother, with a sigh of resignation, 'I hope there'll be nothing in the way of your getting *kosher* meat, Mordecai. For you have to trust to those you live with.'

'That's all right, that's all right, you may be sure, mother,' said Cohen, as if anxious to cut off inquiry on matters in which he was uncertain of the guest's position. 'So, sir,' he added, turning with a look of amused enlightenment to Deronda, 'it was better than learning you had to talk to Mordecai about! I wondered to myself at the time. I thought somehow there was a something.'

'Mordecai will perhaps explain to you how it was that I was seeking him,' said Deronda, feeling that he had better go, and rising as he spoke.

It was agreed that he should come again and the final move be made on the next day but one; but when he was going Mordecai begged to walk with him to the end of the street, and wrapped himself in coat and comforter. It was a March evening, and Deronda did not mean to let him go far, but he understood the wish to be outside the house with him in communicative silence, after the exciting speech that had been filling the last hour. No word was spoken until Deronda had proposed parting, when he said –

'Mirah would wish to thank the Cohens for their goodness. You would wish her to do so – to come and see them, would you not?'

Mordecai did not answer immediately, but at length said –

'I cannot tell. I fear not. There is a family sorrow, and the sight of my sister might be to them as the fresh bleeding of wounds. There is a daughter and sister who will never be restored as Mirah is. But who knows the pathways? We are all of us denying or fulfilling prayers – and men in their careless deeds walk amidst invisible outstretched arms and pleadings made in vain. In my ears I have the prayers of generations past and to come. My life is as nothing to me but the beginning of fulfilment. And yet I am only another prayer – which you will fulfil.'

Deronda pressed his hand, and they parted.

Chapter Forty-Seven

> And you must love him ere to you
> He will seem worthy of your love.
>
> – WORDSWORTH

One might be tempted to envy Deronda providing new clothes for Mordecai, and pleasing himself as if he were sketching a picture in imagining the effect of the fine grey flannel shirts and a dressing-gown very much like a Franciscan's brown frock, with Mordecai's head and neck above them. Half his pleasure was the sense of seeing Mirah's brother through her eyes, and securing her fervid joy from any perturbing impression. And yet, after he had made all things ready, he was visited with a doubt whether he were not mistaking her, and putting the lower effect for the higher: was she not just as capable as he himself had been of feeling the impressive distinction in her brother all the more for that aspect of poverty which was among the memorials of his past? But there were the Meyricks to be propitiated towards this too Judaic brother; and Deronda detected himself piqued into getting out of sight everything that might feed the ready repugnance in minds unblessed with that 'precious seeing,' that bathing of all objects in a solemnity as of sunset-glow, which is begotten of a loving reverential emotion.

And his inclination would have been the more confirmed if he had heard the dialogue round Mrs Meyrick's fire late in the evening, after Mirah had gone to her room. Hans, settled now in his Chelsea rooms, had stayed late, and Mrs Meyrick, poking the fire into a blaze, said –

'Now, Kate, put out your candle, and all come round the fire cosily. Hans, dear, do leave off laughing at those poems for the ninety-ninth time, and come too. I have something wonderful to tell you.'

'As if I didn't know that, ma. I have seen it in the corner of your eye ever so long, and in your pretence of errands,' said Kate, while the girls came to put their feet on the fender, and Hans, pushing his chair near them, sat astride it, resting his fists and chin on the back.

'Well, then, if you are so wise, perhaps you know that Mirah's brother is found!' said Mrs Meyrick, in her clearest accents.

'Oh, confound it!' said Hans, in the same moment.

'Hans, that is wicked,' said Mab. 'Suppose we had lost you.'

'I *can not* help being rather sorry,' said Kate. 'And her mother? – where is she?'

'Her mother is dead.'

'I hope the brother is not a bad man,' said Amy.

'Nor a fellow all smiles and jewellery – a Crystal Palace Assyrian with a hat on,' said Hans, in the worst humour.

'Were there ever such unfeeling children?' said Mrs Meyrick, a little strengthened by the need for opposition. 'You don't think the least bit of Mirah's joy in the matter.'

'You know, ma, Mirah hardly remembers her brother,' said Kate.

'People who are lost for twelve years should never come back again,' said Hans. 'They are always in the way.'

'Hans!' said Mrs Meyrick, reproachfully. 'If you had lost me for *twenty* years, I should have thought —'

'I said twelve years,' Hans broke in. 'Anywhere about twelve years is the time at which lost relations should keep out of the way.'

'Well, but it's nice finding people – there is something to tell,' said Mab, clasping her knees. 'Did Prince Camaralzaman find him?'

Then Mrs Meyrick, in her neat narrative way, told all she knew without interruption. 'Mr Deronda has the highest admiration for him,' she ended – 'seems quite to look up to him. And he says Mirah is just the sister to understand this brother.'

'Deronda is getting perfectly preposterous about those Jews,' said Hans with disgust, rising and setting his chair away with a bang. 'He wants to do everything he can to encourage Mirah in her prejudices.'

'Oh, for shame, Hans! – to speak in that way of Mr Deronda,' said Mab. And Mrs Meyrick's face showed something like an under-current of expression, not allowed to get to the surface.

‘And now we shall never be all together,’ Hans went on, walking about with his hands thrust into the pockets of his brown velveteen coat, ‘but we must have this prophet Elijah to tea with us, and Mirah will think of nothing but sitting on the ruins of Jerusalem. She will be spoiled as an artist – mind that – she will get as narrow as a nun. Everything will be spoiled – our home and everything. I shall take to drinking.’

‘Oh, really, Hans,’ said Kate, impatiently, ‘I do think men are the most contemptible animals in all creation. Every one of them must have everything to his mind, else he is unbearable.’

‘Oh, oh, oh, it’s very dreadful!’ cried Mab. ‘I feel as if ancient Nineveh were come again.’

‘I should like to know what is the good of having gone to the university and knowing everything, if you are so childish, Hans,’ said Amy. ‘You ought to put up with a man that Providence sends you to be kind to. *We* shall have to put up with him.’

‘I hope you will all of you like the new Lamentations of Jeremiah – “to be continued in our next” – that’s all,’ said Hans, seizing his wide-awake. ‘It’s no use being one thing more than another if one has to endure the company of those men with a fixed idea – staring blankly at you, and requiring all your remarks to be small footnotes to their text. If you’re to be under a petrifying well, you’d better be an old boot. I don’t feel myself an old boot.’ Then abruptly, ‘Good-night, little mother,’ bending to kiss her brow in a hasty, desperate manner, and condescendingly, on his way to the door, ‘Good-night, girls.’

‘Suppose Mirah knew how you are behaving,’ said Kate. But her answer was a slam of the door. ‘I *should* like to see Mirah when Mr Deronda tells her,’ she went on, to her mother. ‘I know she will look so beautiful.’

But Deronda on second thoughts had written a letter which Mrs Meyrick received the next morning, begging her to make the revelation instead of waiting for him, not giving the real reason – that he shrank from going again through a narrative in which he seemed to be making himself important, and giving himself a character of general beneficence – but saying that he wished to remain with Mordecai while Mrs Meyrick would bring Mirah on what was to be understood as a visit, so that there might be a little interval before that change of abode which he expected that Mirah herself would propose.

Deronda secretly felt some wondering anxiety how far Mordecai, after years of solitary preoccupation with ideas likely to have become the more exclusive from continual diminution of bodily strength, would allow him to feel a tender interest in his sister over and above the rendering of pious duties. His feeling for the Cohens, and especially for little Jacob, showed a persistent activity of affection; but those objects had entered into his daily life for years; and Deronda felt it noticeable that Mordecai asked no new questions about Mirah, maintaining, indeed, an unusual silence on all subjects, and appearing simply to submit to the changes that were coming over his personal life. He donned his new clothes obediently, but said afterwards to Deronda, with a faint smile, ‘I must keep my old garments by me for a remembrance.’ And when they were seated, awaiting Mirah, he uttered no word, keeping his eyelids closed, but yet showing restless feeling in his face and hands. In fact, Mordecai was undergoing that peculiar nervous perturbation only known to those whose minds, long and habitually moving with strong impetus in one current, are suddenly compelled into a new or re-opened channel. Susceptible people whose strength has been long absorbed by a dominant bias dread an interview that imperiously revives the past, as they would dread a threatening illness. Joy may be there, but joy, too, is terrible.

Deronda felt the infection of excitement, and when he heard the ring at the door, he went out not knowing exactly why, that he might see and greet Mirah beforehand. He was startled to find that she had on the hat and cloak in which he had first seen her – the memorable cloak that had once been wetted for a winding-sheet. She had come down-stairs equipped in this way, and when Mrs Meyrick said, in a tone of question, ‘You like to go in that dress, dear?’ she answered, ‘My brother is poor, and I want to look as much like him as I can, else he may feel distant from me’ – imagining that she should meet him in the workman’s dress. Deronda could not make any remark, but felt secretly rather ashamed of his own fastidious arrangements. They shook hands silently, for Mirah looked pale and awed.

When Deronda opened the door for her, Mordecai had risen, and had his eyes turned towards it with an eager gaze. Mirah took only two or three steps, and then stood still. They looked at each other, motionless. It was less their own presence that they felt than another’s; they were meeting first in memories, compared with which touch was no union. Mirah was the first to break the silence, standing where she was.

‘Ezra,’ she said, in exactly the same tone as when she was telling of her mother’s call to him.

Mordecai with a sudden movement advanced and laid his hands on her shoulders. He was the head taller, and looked down at her tenderly while he said, ‘That was our mother’s voice. You remember her calling me?’

‘Yes, and how you answered her – “Mother!” – and I knew you loved her.’ Mirah threw her arms round her brother’s neck, clasped her little hands behind it, and drew down his face, kissing it with childlike lavishness. Her hat fell backward on the ground and disclosed all her curls.

‘Ah, the dear head, the dear head!’ said Mordecai, in a low loving tone, laying his thin hand gently on the curls.

‘You are very ill, Ezra,’ said Mirah, sadly looking at him with more observation.

‘Yes, dear child, I shall not be long with you in the body,’ was the quiet answer.

‘Oh, I will love you and we will talk to each other,’ said Mirah, with a sweet outpouring of her words, as spontaneous as bird-notes. ‘I will tell you everything, and you will teach me: – you will teach me to be a good Jewess – what she would have liked me to be. I shall always be with you when I am not working. For I work now. I shall get money to keep us. Oh, I have had such good friends.’

Mirah until now had quite forgotten that any one was by, but here she turned with the prettiest attitude, keeping one hand on her brother’s arm while she looked at Mrs Meyrick and Deronda. The little mother’s happy emotion in witnessing this meeting of brother and sister had already won her to Mordecai, who seemed to her really to have more dignity and refinement than she had felt obliged to believe in from Deronda’s account.

‘See this dear lady!’ said Mirah. ‘I was a stranger, a poor wanderer, and she believed in me, and has treated me as a daughter. Please give my brother your hand,’ she added, beseechingly, taking Mrs Meyrick’s hand and putting it in Mordecai’s, then pressing them both with her own and lifting them to her lips.

‘The Eternal Goodness has been with you,’ said Mordecai. ‘You have helped to fulfil our mother’s prayer.’

‘I think we will go now, shall we? – and return later,’ said Deronda, laying a gentle pressure on Mrs Meyrick’s arm, and she immediately complied. He was afraid of any reference to the facts about himself which he had kept back from Mordecai, and he felt no uneasiness now in the thought of the brother and sister being alone together.

Chapter Forty-Eight

> 'Tis a hard and ill-paid task to order all things beforehand by the rule of our own security, as is well hinted by Machiavelli concerning Caesar Borgia, who, saith he, had thought of all that might occur on his father's death, and had provided against every evil chance save only one: it had never come into his mind that when his father died, his own death would quickly follow.

Grandcourt's importance as a subject of this realm was of the grandly passive kind which consists in the inheritance of land. Political and social movements touched him only through the wire of his rental, and his most careful biographer need not have read up on Schleswig-Holstein, the policy of Bismarck, trade-unions, household suffrage, or even the last commercial panic. He glanced over the best newspaper columns on these topics, and his views on them can hardly be said to have wanted breadth, since he embraced all Germans, all commercial men, and all voters liable to use the wrong kind of soap, under the general epithet of 'brutes;' but he took no action on these much agitated questions beyond looking from under his eyelids at any man who mentioned them, and retaining a silence which served to shake the opinions of timid thinkers.

But Grandcourt within his own sphere of interest showed some of the qualities which have entered into triumphal diplomacy of the widest continental sort.

No movement of Gwendolen in relation to Deronda escaped him. He would have denied that he was jealous; because jealousy would have implied some doubt of his own power to hinder what he had determined against. That his wife should have more inclination to another man's society than to his own would not pain him: what he required was that she should be as fully aware as she would have been of a locked hand-cuff, that her inclination was helpless to decide anything in contradiction with his resolve. However much of vacillating whim there might have been in his entrance on matrimony, there was no vacillating in his interpretation of the bond. He had not repented of his marriage; it had really brought more of aim into his life, new objects to exert his will upon; and he had not repented of his choice. His taste was fastidious, and Gwendolen satisfied it: he would not have liked a wife who had not received some elevation of rank from him; nor one who did not command admiration by her mien and beauty; nor one whose nails were not of the right shape; nor one the lobe of whose ear was at all too large and red; nor one who, even if her nails and ears were right, was at the same time a ninny, unable to make spirited answers. These requirements may not seem too exacting to refined contemporaries whose own ability to fall in love has been held in suspense for lack of indispensable details; but fewer perhaps may follow him in his contentment that his wife should be in a temper which would dispose her to fly out if she dared, and that she should have been urged into marrying him by other feelings than passionate attachment. Still, for those who prefer command to love, one does not see why the habit of mind should change precisely at the point of matrimony.

Grandcourt did not feel that he had chosen the wrong wife; and having taken on himself the part of husband, he was not going in any way to be fooled, or allow himself to be seen in a light that could be regarded as pitiable. This was his state of mind – not jealousy; still, his behaviour in some respects was as like jealousy as yellow is to yellow, which colour we know may be the effect of very different causes.

He had come up to town earlier than usual because he wished to be on the spot for legal consultation as to the arrangements of his will, the transference of mortgages, and that transaction with his uncle about the succession to Diplow, which the bait of ready money, adroitly dangled without importunity, had finally won him to agree upon. But another acceptable accompaniment of his being in town was the presentation of himself with the beautiful bride whom he had chosen to marry in spite of what other people might have expected of him. It is true that Grandcourt went about with the sense that he did not care a languid curse for any one's admiration; but this state of not-caring, just as much as desire, required its related object – namely, a world of admiring or envying spectators: for if you are fond of looking stonily at smiling persons, the persons must be there and they must smile – a rudimentary truth which is surely forgotten by those who complain of mankind as generally contemptible, since any other aspect of the race must disappoint the voracity of their contempt. Grandcourt, in town for the first time with his wife, had his non-caring abstinence from curses enlarged and diversified by splendid receptions, by conspicuous rides and drives, by presentations of himself with her on all distinguished occasions. He wished her to be sought after; he liked that 'fellows' should be eager to talk with her and escort her within his observation; there was even a kind of lofty coquetry

on her part that he would not have objected to. But what he did not like were her ways in relation to Deronda.

After the musical party at Lady Mallinger's, when Grandcourt had observed the dialogue on the settee as keenly as Hans had done, it was characteristic of him that he named Deronda for invitation along with the Mallingers, tenaciously avoiding the possible suggestion to anybody concerned that Deronda's presence or absence could be of the least importance to him; and he made no direct observation to Gwendolen on her behaviour that evening, lest the expression of his disgust should be a little too strong to satisfy his own pride. But a few days afterwards he remarked, without being careful of the *à propos* –

'Nothing makes a woman more of a gawky than looking out after people and showing tempers in public. A woman ought to have fine manners. Else it's intolerable to appear with her.'

Gwendolen made the expected application, and was not without alarm at the notion of being a gawky. For she, too, with her melancholy distaste for things, preferred that her distaste should include admirers. But the sense of overhanging rebuke only intensified the strain of expectation towards any meeting with Deronda. The novelty and excitement of her town life was like the hurry and constant change of foreign travel: whatever might be the inward despondency, there was a programme to be fulfilled, not without gratification to many-sided self. But, as always happens with a deep interest, the comparatively rare occasions on which she could exchange any words with Deronda had a diffusive effect in her consciousness, magnifying their communication with each other, and therefore enlarging the place she imagined it to have in his mind. How could Deronda help this? He certainly did not avoid her; rather he wished to convince her by every delicate indirect means that her confidence in him had not been indiscreet, since it had not lowered his respect. Moreover, he liked being near her – how could it be otherwise? She was something more than a problem: she was a lovely woman, for the turn of whose mind and fate he had a care which, however futile it might be, kept soliciting him as a responsibility, perhaps all the more that, when he dared to think of his own future, he saw it lying far away from this splendid sad-hearted creature, who, because he had once been impelled to arrest her attention momentarily, as he might have seized her arm with warning to hinder her from stepping where there was danger, had turned to him with a beseeching persistent need.

One instance in which Grandcourt stimulated a feeling in Gwendolen that he would have liked to suppress without seeming to care about it, had relation to Mirah. Gwendolen's inclination lingered over the project of the singing lessons as a sort of obedience to Deronda's advice, but day followed day with that want of perceived leisure which belongs to lives where there is no work to mark off intervals; and the continual liability to Grandcourt's presence and surveillance seemed to flatten every effort to the level of the boredom which his manner expressed: his negative mind was as diffusive as fog, clinging to all objects, and spoiling all contact.

But one morning when they were breakfasting, Gwendolen, in a recurrent fit of determination to exercise her old spirit, said, dallying prettily over her prawns without eating them –

'I think of making myself accomplished while we are in town, and having singing lessons.'

'Why?' said Grandcourt, languidly.

'Why?' echoed Gwendolen, playing at sauciness; 'because I can't eat *pâté de foie gras* to make me sleepy, and I can't smoke, and I can't go to the club to make me like to come away again – I want a variety of *ennui*. What would be the most convenient time, when you are busy with your lawyers and people, for me to have lessons from that little Jewess, whose singing is getting all the rage?'

'Whenever you like,' said Grandcourt, pushing away his plate, and leaning back in his chair while he looked at her with his most lizard-like expression, and played with the ears of the tiny spaniel on his lap (Gwendolen had taken a dislike to the dogs because they fawned on him).

Then he said, languidly, 'I don't see why a lady should sing. Amateurs make fools of themselves. A lady can't risk herself in that way in company. And one doesn't want to hear squalling in private.'

'I like frankness: that seems to me a husband's great charm,' said Gwendolen, with her little upward movement of her chin, as she turned her eyes away from his, and lifting a prawn before her, looked at the boiled ingenuousness of its eyes as preferable to the lizard's. 'But,' she added, having devoured her mortification, 'I suppose you don't object to Miss Lapidoth's singing at our party on the 4th? I thought of engaging her. Lady Brackenshaw had her, you know; and the Raymonds, who are very particular about their music. And Mr Deronda, who is a musician himself, and a first-rate judge, says that there is no singing in such good taste as hers for a drawing-room. I think his opinion is an authority.'

She meant to sling a small stone at her husband in that way.

'It's very indecent of Deronda to go about praising that girl,' said Grandcourt, in a tone of indifference.

'Indecent!' exclaimed Gwendolen, reddening and looking at him again, overcome by startled wonder, and unable to reflect on the probable falsity of the phrase – 'to go about praising.'

'Yes; and especially when she is patronised by Lady Mallinger. He ought to hold his tongue about her. Men

can see what is his relation to her.'

'Men who judge of others by themselves,' said Gwendolen, turning white after her redness, and immediately smitten with a dread of her own words.

'Of course. And a woman should take their judgment – else she is likely to run her head into the wrong place,' said Grandcourt, conscious of using pincers on that white creature. 'I suppose you take Deronda for a saint.'

'Oh dear no!' said Gwendolen, summoning desperately her almost miraculous power of self-control, and speaking in a high hard tone. 'Only a little less of a monster.'

She rose, pushed her chair away without hurry, and walked out of the room with something like the care of a man who is afraid of showing that he has taken more wine than usual. She turned the keys inside her dressing-room doors, and sat down for some time looking as pale and quiet as when she was leaving the breakfast-room. Even in the moments after reading the poisonous letter she had hardly had more cruel sensations than now; for emotion was at the acute point, where it is not distinguishable from sensation. Deronda unlike what she had believed him to be, was an image which affected her as a hideous apparition would have done, quite apart from the way in which it was produced. It had taken hold of her as pain before she could consider whether it were fiction or truth; and further to hinder her power of resistance came the sudden perception, how very slight were the grounds of her faith in Deronda – how little she knew of his life – how childish she had been in her confidence. His rebukes and his severity to her began to seem odious, along with all the poetry and lofty doctrine in the world, whatever it might be; and the grave beauty of his face seemed the most unpleasant mask that the common habits of men could put on.

All this went on in her with the rapidity of a sick dream; and her start into resistance was very much like a waking. Suddenly from out the grey sombre morning there came a stream of sunshine, wrapping her in warmth and light where she sat in stony stillness. She moved gently and looked round her – there was a world outside this bad dream, and the dream proved nothing; she rose, stretching her arms upward and clasping her hands with her habitual attitude when she was seeking relief from oppressive feeling, and walked about the room in this flood of sunbeams.

'It is not true! What does it matter whether *he* believes it or not?' This was what she repeated to herself – but this was not her faith come back again; it was only the desperate cry of faith, finding suffocation intolerable. And how could she go on through the day in this state? With one of her impetuous alternations, her imagination flew to wild actions by which she would convince herself of what she wished: she would go to Lady Mallinger and question her about Mirah; she would write to Deronda and upbraid him with making the world all false and wicked and hopeless to her – to him she dared pour out all the bitter indignation of her heart. No; she would go to Mirah. This last form taken by her need was more definitely practicable, and quickly became imperious. No matter what came of it. She had the pretext of asking Mirah to sing at her party on the 4th. What was she going to say besides? How satisfy herself? She did not foresee – she could not wait to foresee. If that idea which was maddening her had been a living thing, she would have wanted to throttle it without waiting to foresee what would come of the act. She rang her bell and asked if Mr Grandcourt were gone out: finding that he was, she ordered the carriage, and began to dress for the drive; then she went down, and walked about the large drawing-room like an imprisoned dumb creature, not recognising herself in the glass panels, not noting any object around her in the painted gilded prison. Her husband would probably find out where she had been, and punish her in some way or other – no matter – she could neither desire nor fear anything just now but the assurance that she had not been deluding herself in her trust.

She was provided with Mirah's address. Soon she was on the way with all the fine equipage necessary to carry about her poor uneasy heart, depending in its palpitations on some answer or other to questioning which she did not know how she should put. She was as heedless of what happened before she found that Miss Lapidoth was at home, as one is of lobbies and passages on the way to a court of justice – heedless of everything till she was in a room where there were folding-doors, and she heard Deronda's voice behind it. Doubtless the identification was helped by forecast, but she was as certain of it as if she had seen him. She was frightened at her own agitation, and began to unbutton her gloves that she might button them again, and bite her lips over the pretended difficulty, while the door opened, and Mirah presented herself with perfect quietude and a sweet smile of recognition. There was relief in the sight of her face, and Gwendolen was able to smile in return, while she put out her hand in silence; and as she seated herself, all the while hearing the voice, she felt some reflux of energy in the confused sense that the truth could not be anything that she dreaded. Mirah drew her chair very near, as if she felt that the sound of the conversation should be subdued, and looked at her visitor with placid expectation, while Gwendolen began in a low tone, with something that seemed like bashfulness –

'Perhaps you wonder to see me – perhaps I ought to have written – but I wished to make a particular request.'

‘I am glad to see you instead of having a letter,’ said Mirah, wondering at the changed expression and manner of the ‘Vandyke duchess,’ as Hans had taught her to call Gwendolen. The rich colour and the calmness of her own face were in strong contrast with the pale agitated beauty under the plumed hat.

‘I thought,’ Gwendolen went on – ‘at least, I hoped you would not object to sing at our house on the 4th – in the evening – at a party like Lady Brackenshaw’s. I should be so much obliged.’

‘I shall be very happy to sing for you. At ten?’ said Mirah, while Gwendolen seemed to get more instead of less embarrassed.

‘At ten, please,’ she answered; then paused, and felt that she had nothing more to say. She could not go. It was impossible to rise and say good-bye. Deronda’s voice was in her ears. She must say it – she could contrive no other sentence –

‘Mr Deronda is in the next room.’

‘Yes,’ said Mirah, in her former tone. ‘He is reading Hebrew with my brother.’

‘You have a brother?’ said Gwendolen, who had heard this from Lady Mallinger, but had not minded it then.

‘Yes, a dear brother who is ill – consumptive, and Mr Deronda is the best of friends to him, as he has been to me,’ said Mirah, with the impulse that will not let us pass the mention of a precious person indifferently.

‘Tell me,’ said Gwendolen, putting her hand on Mirah’s, and speaking hardly above a whisper – ‘tell me – tell me the truth. You are sure he is quite good. You know no evil of him. Any evil that people say of him is false.’

Could the proud-spirited woman have behaved more like a child? But the strange words penetrated Mirah with nothing but a sense of solemnity and indignation. With a sudden light in her eyes and a tremor in her voice, she said –

‘Who are the people that say evil of him? I would not believe any evil of him, if an angel came to tell it me. He found me when I was so miserable – I was going to drown myself – I looked so poor and forsaken – you would have thought I was a beggar by the wayside. And he treated me as if I had been a king’s daughter. He took me to the best of women. He found my brother for me. And he honours my brother – though he too was poor – oh, almost as poor as he could be. And my brother honours him. That is no light thing to say’ – here Mirah’s tone changed to one of proud emphasis, and she shook her head backward – ‘for my brother is very learned and great-minded. And Mr Deronda says there are few men equal to him.’ Some Jewish defiance had flamed into her indignant gratitude, and her anger could not help including Gwendolen, since she seemed to have doubted Deronda’s goodness.

But Gwendolen was like one parched with thirst, drinking the fresh water that spreads through the frame as a sufficient bliss. She did not notice that Mirah was angry with her; she was not distinctly conscious of anything but of the penetrating sense that Deronda and his life were no more like her husband’s conception than the morning in the horizon was like the morning mixed with street gas: even Mirah’s words seemed to melt into the indefiniteness of her relief. She could hardly have repeated them, or said how her whole state of feeling was changed. She pressed Mirah’s hands, and said, ‘Thank you, thank you,’ in a hurried whisper – then rose, and added, with only a hazy consciousness, ‘I must go, I shall see you – on the 4th – I am so much obliged’ – bowing herself out automatically; while Mirah, opening the door for her, wondered at what seemed a sudden retreat into chill loftiness.

Gwendolen, indeed, had no feeling to spare in any effusiveness towards the creature who had brought her relief. The passionate need of contradiction to Grandcourt’s estimate of Deronda, a need which had blunted her sensibility to everything else, was no sooner satisfied than she wanted to be gone: she began to be aware that she was out of place, and to dread Deronda’s seeing her. And once in the carriage again, she had the vision of what awaited her at home. When she drew up before the door in Grosvenor Square, her husband was arriving with a cigar between his fingers. He threw it away and handed her out, accompanying her upstairs. She turned into the drawing-room, lest he should follow her farther and give her no place to retreat to; then sat down with a weary air, taking off her gloves, rubbing her hand over her forehead, and making his presence as much of a cipher as possible. But he sat too, and not far from her – just in front, where to avoid looking at him must have the emphasis of effort.

‘May I ask where you have been at this extraordinary hour?’ said Grandcourt.

‘Oh yes; I have been to Miss Lapidoth’s to ask her to come and sing for us,’ said Gwendolen, laying her gloves on the little table beside her, and looking down at them.

‘And to ask her about her relations with Deronda?’ said Grandcourt, with the coldest possible sneer in his low voice, which in poor Gwendolen’s ear was diabolical.

For the first time since their marriage she flashed out upon him without inward check. Turning her eyes full on his she said, in a biting tone –

‘Yes; and what you said is false – a low, wicked falsehood.’

‘She told you so – did she?’ returned Grandcourt, with a more thoroughly distilled sneer.

Gwendolen was mute. The daring anger within her was turned into the rage of dumbness. What reasons for her belief could she give? All the reasons that seemed so strong and living within her – she saw them suffocated and shrivelled up under her husband’s breath. There was no proof to give, but her own impression, which would seem to him her own folly. She turned her head quickly away from him and looked angrily towards the end of the room: she would have risen, but he was in her way.

Grandcourt saw his advantage. ‘It’s of no consequence so far as her singing goes,’ he said, in his superficial drawl. ‘You can have her to sing, if you like.’ Then, after a pause, he added in his lowest imperious tone, ‘But you will please to observe that you are not to go near that house again. As my wife, you must take my word about what is proper for you. When you undertook to be Mrs Grandcourt, you undertook not to make a fool of yourself. You have been making a fool of yourself this morning; and if you were to go on as you have begun, you might soon get yourself talked of at the clubs in a way you would not like. What do *you* know about the world? You have married *me*, and must be guided by my opinion.’

Every slow sentence of that speech had a terrific mastery in it for Gwendolen’s nature. If the low tones had come from a physician telling her that her symptoms were those of a fatal disease, and prognosticating its course, she could not have been more helpless against the argument that lay in it. But she was permitted to move now, and her husband never again made any reference to what had occurred this morning. He knew the force of his own words. If this white-handed man with the perpendicular profile had been sent to govern a difficult colony, he might have won reputation among his contemporaries. He had certainly ability, would have understood that it was safer to exterminate than to cajole superseded proprietors, and would not have flinched from making things safe in that way.

Gwendolen did not, for all this, part with her recovered faith; – rather, she kept it with a more anxious tenacity, as a Protestant of old kept his Bible hidden or a Catholic his crucifix, according to the side favoured by the civil arm; and it was characteristic of her that apart from the impression gained concerning Deronda in that visit, her imagination was little occupied with Mirah or the eulogised brother. The one result established for her was, that Deronda had acted simply as a generous benefactor, and the phrase ‘reading Hebrew’ had fleeted unimpressively across her sense of hearing, as a stray stork might have made its peculiar flight across her landscape without rousing any surprised reflection on its natural history.

But the issue of that visit, as it regarded her husband, took a strongly active part in the process which made an habitual conflict within her, and was the cause of some external change perhaps not observed by any one except Deronda. As the weeks went on bringing occasional transient interviews with her, he thought that he perceived in her an intensifying of her superficial hardness and resolute display, which made her abrupt betrayals of agitation the more marked and disturbing to him.

In fact, she was undergoing a sort of discipline for the refractory which, as little as possible like conversion, bends half the self with a terrible strain, and exasperates the unwillingness of the other half. Grandcourt had an active divination rather than discernment of refractoriness in her, and what had happened about Mirah quickened his suspicion that there was an increase of it dependent on the occasions when she happened to see Deronda: there was some ‘confounded nonsense’ between them: he did not imagine it exactly as flirtation, and his imagination in other branches was rather restricted; but it was nonsense that evidently kept up a kind of simmering in her mind – an inward action which might become disagreeably outward. Husbands in the old time are known to have suffered from a threatening devoutness in their wives, presenting itself first indistinctly as oddity, and ending in that mild form of lunatic asylum, a nunnery: Grandcourt had a vague perception of threatening moods in Gwendolen which the unity between them in his views of marriage required him peremptorily to check. Among the means he chose, one was peculiar, and was less ably calculated than the speeches we have just heard.

He determined that she should know the main purport of the will he was making, but he could not communicate this himself, because it involved the fact of his relation to Mrs Glasher and her children; and that there should be any overt recognition of this between Gwendolen and himself was supremely repugnant to him. Like all proud, closely-wrapped natures, he shrank from explicitness and detail, even on trivialities, if they were personal: a valet must maintain a strict reserve with him on the subject of shoes and stockings. And clashing was intolerable to him: his habitual want was to put collision out of the question by the quiet massive pressure of his rule. But he wished Gwendolen to know that before he made her an offer it was no secret to him that she was aware of his relations with Lydia, her previous knowledge being the apology for bringing the subject before her now. Some men in his place might have thought of writing what he wanted her to know, in the form of a letter. But Grandcourt hated writing: even writing a note was a bore to him, and he had long been accustomed to have all his writing done by Lush. We know that there are persons who will forego their own obvious interest rather than do anything so disagreeable as to write letters; and it is not probable that these imperfect utilitarians would rush into manuscript and syntax on a difficult subject in order to save

another's feelings. To Grandcourt it did not even occur that he should, would, or could write to Gwendolen the information in question; and the only medium of communication he could use was Lush, who, to his mind, was as much of an implement as pen and paper. But here too Grandcourt had his reserves, and would not have uttered a word likely to encourage Lush in an impudent sympathy with any supposed grievance in a marriage which had been discommended by him. Who that has a confidant escapes believing too little in his penetration, and too much in his discretion? Grandcourt had always allowed Lush to know his external affairs indiscriminately, irregularities, debts, want of ready money; he had only used discrimination about what he would allow his confidant to say to him; and he had been so accustomed to this human tool, that the having him at call in London was a recovery of lost ease. It followed that Lush knew all the provisions of the will more exactly than they were known to the testator himself.

Grandcourt did not doubt that Gwendolen, since she was a woman who could put two and two together, knew or suspected Lush to be the contriver of her interview with Lydia, and that this was the reason why her first request was for his banishment. But the bent of a woman's inferences on mixed subjects which excite mixed passions is not determined by her capacity for simple addition; and here Grandcourt lacked the only organ of thinking that could have saved him from mistake – namely, some experience of the mixed passions concerned. He had correctly divined one half of Gwendolen's dread – all that related to her personal pride, and her perception that his will must conquer hers; but the remorseful half, even if he had known of her broken promise, was as much out of his imagination as the other side of the moon. What he believed her to feel about Lydia was solely a tongue-tied jealousy, and what he believed Lydia to have written with the jewels was the fact that she had once been used to wearing them, with other amenities such as he imputed to the intercourse of jealous women. He had the triumphant certainty that he could aggravate the jealousy and yet smite it with a more absolute dumbness. His object was to engage all his wife's egoism on the same side as his own, and in his employment of Lush he did not intend an insult to her: she ought to understand that he was the only possible envoy. Grandcourt's view of things was considerably fenced in by his general sense, that what suited him, others must put up with. There is no escaping the fact that want of sympathy condemns us to a corresponding stupidity. Mephistopheles thrown upon real life, and obliged to manage his own plots, would inevitably make blunders.

One morning he went to Gwendolen in the boudoir beyond the back drawing-room, hat and gloves in hand, and said with his best-tempered, most persuasive drawl, standing before her and looking down on her as she sat with a book on her lap –

'A – Gwendolen, there's some business about property to be explained. I have told Lush to come and explain it to you. He knows all about these things. I am going out. He can come up now. He's the only person who can explain. I suppose you'll not mind.'

'You know that I do mind,' said Gwendolen, angrily, starting up. 'I shall not see him.' She showed the intention to dart away to the door. Grandcourt was before her, with his back towards it. He was prepared for her anger, and showed none in return, saying, with the same sort of remonstrant tone that he might have used about an objection to dining out –

'It's no use making a fuss. There are plenty of brutes in the world that one has to talk to. People with any *savoir vivre* don't make a fuss about such things. Some business must be done. You don't expect agreeable people to do it. If I employ Lush, the proper thing for you is to take it as a matter of course. Not to make a fuss about it. Not to toss your head and bite your lips about people of that sort.'

The drawling and the pauses with which this speech was uttered gave time for crowding reflections in Gwendolen, quelling her resistance. What was there to be told her about property? This word had certain dominant associations for her, first with her mother, then with Mrs Glasher and her children. What would be the use if she refused to see Lush? Could she ask Grandcourt to tell her himself? That might be intolerable, even if he consented, which it was certain he would not, if he had made up his mind to the contrary. The humiliation of standing an obvious prisoner, with her husband barring the door, was not to be borne any longer, and she turned away to lean against a cabinet, while Grandcourt again moved towards her.

'I have arranged with Lush to come up now, while I am out,' he said, after a long organ stop, during which Gwendolen made no sign. 'Shall I tell him he may come?'

Yet another pause before she could say 'Yes' – her face turned obliquely and her eyes cast down.

'I shall come back in time to ride, if you like to get ready,' said Grandcourt. No answer. 'She is in a desperate rage,' thought he. But the rage was silent, and therefore not disagreeable to him. It followed that he turned her chin and kissed her, while she still kept her eyelids down, and she did not move them until he was on the other side of the door.

What was she to do? Search where she would in her consciousness, she found no plea to justify a plaint. Any romantic illusions she had had in marrying this man had turned on her power of using him as she liked. He was using her as he liked.

She sat awaiting the announcement of Lush as a sort of searing operation that she had to go through. The facts that galled her gathered a burning power when she thought of their lying in his mind. It was all a part of that new gambling in which the losing was not simply a *minus*, but a terrible *plus* that had never entered into her reckoning.

Lush was neither quite pleased nor quite displeased with his task. Grandcourt had said to him by way of conclusion, 'Don't make yourself more disagreeable than nature obliges you.'

'That depends,' thought Lush. But he said, 'I will write a brief abstract for Mrs Grandcourt to read.' He did not suggest that he should make the whole communication in writing, which was a proof that the interview did not wholly displease him.

Some provision was being made for himself in the will, and he had no reason to be in a bad humour, even if a bad humour had been common with him. He was perfectly convinced that he had penetrated all the secrets of the situation; but he had no diabolic delight in it. He had only the small movements of gratified self-loving resentment in discerning that this marriage fulfilled his own foresight in not being as satisfactory as the supercilious young lady had expected it to be, and as Grandcourt wished to feign that it was. He had no persistent spite much stronger than what gives the seasoning of ordinary scandal to those who repeat it and exaggerate it by their conjectures. With no active compassion or goodwill, he had just as little active malevolence, being chiefly occupied in liking his particular pleasures, and not disliking anything but what hindered those pleasures – everything else ranking with the last murder and the last *opera buffa*, under the head of things to talk about. Nevertheless, he was not indifferent to the prospect of being treated uncivilly by a beautiful woman, or to the counter-balancing fact that his present commission put into his hands an official power of humiliating her. He did not mean to use it needlessly; but there are some persons so gifted in relation to us that their 'How do you do?' seems charged with offence.

By the time that Mr Lush was announced, Gwendolen had braced herself to a bitter resolve that he should not witness the slightest betrayal of her feeling, whatever he might have to tell. She invited him to sit down with stately quietude. After all, what was this man to her? He was not in the least like her husband. Her power of hating a coarse, familiar-mannered man, with clumsy hands, was now relaxed by the intensity with which she hated his contrast.

He held a small paper folded in his hand while he spoke.

'I need hardly say that I should not have presented myself if Mr Grandcourt had not expressed a strong wish to that effect – as no doubt he had mentioned to you.'

From some voices that speech might have sounded entirely reverential, and even timidly apologetic. Lush had no intention to the contrary, but to Gwendolen's ear his words had as much insolence in them as his prominent eyes, and the pronoun 'you' was too familiar. He ought to have addressed the folding-screen, and spoken of her as Mrs Grandcourt. She gave the smallest sign of a bow, and Lush went on, with a little awkwardness, getting entangled in what is elegantly called tautology.

'My having been in Mr Grandcourt's confidence for fifteen years or more – since he was a youth, in fact – of course gives me a peculiar position. He can speak to me of affairs that he could not mention to any one else; and, in fact, he could not have employed any one else in this affair. I have accepted the task out of friendship for him. Which is my apology for accepting the task – if you would have preferred some one else.'

He paused, but she made no sign, and Lush, to give himself a countenance in an apology which met no acceptance, opened the folded paper, and looked at it vaguely before he began to speak again.

'This paper contains some information about Mr Grandcourt's will, an abstract of a part he wished you to know – if you'll be good enough to cast your eyes over it. But there is something I had to say by way of introduction – which I hope you'll pardon me for, if it's not quite agreeable.' Lush found that he was behaving better than he had expected, and had no idea how insulting he made himself with his 'not quite agreeable.'

'Say what you have to say without apologising, please,' said Gwendolen, with the air she might have bestowed on a dog-stealer come to claim a reward for finding the dog he had stolen.

'I have only to remind you of something that occurred before your engagement to Mr Grandcourt,' said Lush, not without the rise of some willing insolence in exchange for her scorn. 'You met a lady in Cardell Chase, if you remember, who spoke to you of her position with regard to Mr Grandcourt. She had children with her – one a very fine boy.'

Gwendolen's lips were almost as pale as her cheeks: her passion had no weapons – words were no better than chips. This man's speech was like a sharp knife-edge drawn across her skin; but even her indignation at the employment of Lush was getting merged in a crowd of other feelings, dim and alarming as a crowd of ghosts.

'Mr Grandcourt was aware that you were acquainted with this unfortunate affair beforehand, and he thinks it only right that his position and intentions should be made quite clear to you. It is an affair of property and prospects; and if there were any objection you had to make, if you would mention it to me – it is a subject

which of course he would rather not speak about himself – if you will be good enough just to read this.' With the last words Lush rose and presented the paper to her.

When Gwendolen resolved that she would betray no feeling in the presence of this man, she had not prepared herself to hear that her husband knew the silent consciousness, the silently accepted terms on which she had married him. She dared not raise her hand to take the paper, lest it should visibly tremble. For a moment Lush stood holding it towards her, and she felt his gaze on her as ignominy, before she could say even with low-toned haughtiness –

'Lay it on the table. And go into the next room, please.'

Lush obeyed, thinking as he took an easy-chair in the back drawing-room, 'My lady winces considerably. She didn't know what would be the charge for that superfine article, Henleigh Grandcourt.' But it seemed to him that a penniless girl had done better than she had any right to expect, and that she had been uncommonly knowing for her years and opportunities: her words to Lydia meant nothing, and her running away had probably been part of her adroitness. It had turned out a master-stroke.

Meanwhile Gwendolen was rallying her nerves to the reading of the paper. She must read it. Her whole being – pride, longing for rebellion, dreams of freedom, remorseful conscience, dread of fresh visitation – all made one need to know what the paper contained. But at first it was not easy to take in the meaning of the words. When she had succeeded, she found that in the case of there being no son an issue of her marriage, Grandcourt had made the small Henleigh his heir; – that was all she cared to extract from the paper with any distinctness. The other statements as to what provision would be made for her in the same case, she hurried over, getting only a confused perception of thousands and Gadsmere. It was enough. She could dismiss the man in the next room with the defiant energy which had revived in her at the idea that this question of property and inheritance was meant as a finish to her humiliations and her thraldom.

She thrust the paper between the leaves of her book, which she took in her hand, and walked with her stateliest air into the next room, where Lush immediately rose, awaiting her approach. When she was four yards from him, it was hardly an instant that she paused to say in a high tone, while she swept him with her eyelashes –

'Tell Mr Grandcourt that his arrangements are just what I desired' – passing on without haste, and leaving Lush time to mingle some admiration of her graceful back with that half-amused sense of her spirit and impertinence, which he expressed by raising his eyebrows and just thrusting his tongue between his teeth. He really did not want her to be worse punished, and he was glad to think that it was time to go and lunch at the club, where he meant to have a lobster salad.

What did Gwendolen look forward to? When her husband returned he found her equipped in her riding-dress, ready to ride out with him. She was not again going to be hysterical, or take to her bed and say she was ill. That was the implicit resolve adjusting her muscles before she could have framed it in words, as she walked out of the room, leaving Lush behind her. She was going to act in the spirit of her message, and not to give herself time to reflect. She rang the bell for her maid, and went with the usual care through her change of toilet. Doubtless her husband had meant to produce a great effect on her: by-and-by perhaps she would let him see an effect the very opposite of what he intended; but at present all that she could show was a defiant satisfaction in what had been presumed to be disagreeable. It came as an instinct rather than a thought, that to show any sign which could be interpreted as jealousy, when she had just been insultingly reminded that the conditions were what she had accepted with her eyes open, would be the worst self-humiliation. She said to herself that she had not time to-day to be clear about her future actions; all she could be clear about was that she would match her husband in ignoring any ground for excitement. She not only rode, but went out with him to dine, contributing nothing to alter their mutual manner, which was never that of rapid interchange in discourse; and curiously enough she rejected a handkerchief on which her maid had by mistake put the wrong scent – a scent that Grandcourt had once objected to. Gwendolen would not have liked to be an object of disgust to this husband whom she hated: she liked all disgust to be on her side.

But to defer thought in this way was something like trying to talk down the singing in her own ears. The thought that is bound up with our passion is as penetrative as air – everything is porous to it; bows, smiles, conversation, repartee, are mere honeycombs where such thought rushes freely, not always with a taste of honey. And without shutting herself up in any solitude, Gwendolen seemed at the end of nine or ten hours to have gone through a labyrinth of reflection, in which already the same succession of prospects had been repeated, the same fallacious outlets rejected, the same shrinking from the necessities of every course. Already she was undergoing some hardening effect from feeling that she was under eyes which saw her past actions solely in the light of her lowest motives. She lived back in the scenes of her courtship, with the new bitter consciousness of what had been in Grandcourt's mind – certain now, with her present experience of him, that he had had a peculiar triumph in conquering her dumb repugnance, and that ever since their marriage he had had a cold exultation in knowing her fancied secret. Her imagination exaggerated every tyrannical impulse he

was capable of. ‘I will insist on being separated from him’ – was her first darting determination: then, ‘I will leave him, whether he consents or not. If this boy becomes his heir, I have made an atonement.’ But neither in darkness nor in daylight could she imagine the scenes which must carry out those determinations with the courage to feel them endurable. How could she run away to her own family – carry distress among them, and render herself an object of scandal in the society she had left behind her? What future lay before her as Mrs Grandcourt gone back to her mother, who would be made destitute again by the rupture of the marriage for which one chief excuse had been that it had brought that mother a maintenance? She had lately been seeing her uncle and Anna in London, and though she had been saved from any difficulty about inviting them to stay in Grosvenor Square by their wish to be with Rex, who would not risk a meeting with her, the transient visits she had had from them helped now in giving stronger colour to the picture of what it would be for her to take refuge in her own family. What could she say to justify her flight? Her uncle would tell her to go back. Her mother would cry. Her aunt and Anna would look at her with wondering alarm. Her husband would have power to compel her. She had absolutely nothing that she could allege against him in judicious or judicial ears. And to ‘insist on separation!’ That was an easy combination of words; but considered as an action to be executed against Grandcourt, it would be about as practicable as to give him a pliant disposition and a dread of other people’s unwillingness. How was she to begin? What was she to say that would not be a condemnation of herself? ‘If I am to have misery anyhow,’ was the bitter refrain of her rebellious dreams, ‘I had better have the misery that I can keep to myself.’ Moreover, her capability of rectitude told her again and again that she had no right to complain of her contract, or to withdraw from it.

And always among the images that drove her back to submission was Deronda. The idea of herself separated from her husband, gave Deronda a changed, perturbing, painful place in her consciousness: instinctively she felt that the separation would be from him too, and in the prospective vision of herself as a solitary, dubiously regarded woman, she felt some tingling bashfulness at the remembrance of her behaviour towards him. The association of Deronda with a dubious position for herself was intolerable. And what would he say if he knew everything? Probably that she ought to bear what she had brought on herself, unless she were sure that she could make herself a better woman by taking any other course. And what sort of woman was she to be – solitary, sickened of life, looked at with a suspicious kind of pity? – even if she could dream of success in getting that dreary freedom. Mrs Grandcourt ‘run away’ would be a more pitiable creature than Gwendolen Harleth condemned to teach the bishop’s daughters, and to be inspected by Mrs Mompert.

One characteristic trait in her conduct is worth mentioning. She would not look a second time at the paper Lush had given her; and before ringing for her maid she locked it up in a travelling-desk which was at hand, proudly resolved against curiosity about what was allotted to herself in connection with Gadsmere – feeling herself branded in the minds of her husband and his confidant with the meanness that would accept marriage and wealth on any conditions, however dishonourable and humiliating.

Day after day the same pattern of thinking was repeated. There came nothing to change the situation – no new elements in the sketch – only a recurrence which engraved it. The May weeks went on into June, and still Mrs Grandcourt was outwardly in the same place, presenting herself as she was expected to do in the accustomed scenes, with the accustomed grace, beauty, and costume; from church at one end of the week, through all the scale of desirable receptions, to opera at the other. Church was not markedly distinguished in her mind from the other forms of self-presentation, for marriage had included no instruction that enabled her to connect liturgy and sermon with any larger order of the world than that of unexplained and perhaps inexplicable social fashions. While a laudable zeal was labouring to carry the light of spiritual law up the alleys where law is chiefly known as the policeman, the brilliant Mrs Grandcourt, condescending a little to a fashionable Rector and conscious of a feminine advantage over a learned Dean, was, so far as pastoral care and religious fellowship were concerned, in as complete a solitude as a man in a lighthouse.

Can we wonder at the practical submission which hid her constructive rebellion? The combination is common enough, as we know from the number of persons who make us aware of it in their own case by a clamorous unwearied statement of the reasons against their submitting to a situation which, on inquiry, we discover to be the least disagreeable within their reach. Poor Gwendolen had both too much and too little mental power and dignity to make herself exceptional. No wonder that Deronda now marked some hardening in a look and manner which were schooled daily to the suppression of feeling.

For example. One morning, riding in Rotten Row with Grandcourt by her side, she saw standing against the railing at the turn, just facing them, a dark-eyed lady with a little girl and a blond boy, whom she at once recognised as the beings in all the world the most painful for her to behold. She and Grandcourt had just slackened their pace to a walk; he being on the outer side was the nearer to the unwelcome vision, and Gwendolen had not presence of mind to do anything but glance away from the dark eyes that met hers piercingly towards Grandcourt, who wheeled past the group with an unmoved face, giving no sign of recognition.

Immediately she felt a rising rage against him mingling with her shame for herself, and the words, 'You might at least have raised your hat to her,' flew impetuously to her lips – but did not pass them. If as her husband, in her company, he chose to ignore these creatures whom she herself had excluded from the place she was filling, how could she be the person to reproach him? She was dumb.

It was not chance, but her own design, that had brought Mrs Glasher there with her boy. She had come to town under the pretext of making purchases – really wanting educational apparatus for the children, and had had interviews with Lush in which he had not refused to soothe her uneasy mind by representing the probabilities as all on the side of her ultimate triumph. Let her keep quiet, and she might live to see the marriage dissolve itself in one way or other – Lush hinted at several ways – leaving the succession assured to her boy. She had had an interview with Grandcourt too, who had as usual told her to behave like a reasonable woman, and threatened punishment if she were troublesome; but had, also as usual, vindicated himself from any wish to be stingy, the money he was receiving from Sir Hugo on account of Diplow encouraging his disposition to be lavish. Lydia, feeding on the probabilities in her favour, devoured her helpless wrath along with that pleasanter nourishment; but she could not let her discretion go entirely without the reward of making a Medusa-apparition before Gwendolen, vindictiveness and jealousy finding relief in an outlet of venom, though it were as futile as that of a viper already flung to the other side of the hedge. Hence each day, after finding out from Lush the likely time for Gwendolen to be riding, she had watched at that post, daring Grandcourt so far. Why should she not take little Henleigh into the Park?

The Medusa-apparition was made effective beyond Lydia's conception by the shock it gave Gwendolen actually to see Grandcourt ignoring this woman who had once been the nearest in the world to him, along with the children she had borne him. And all the while the dark shadow thus cast on the lot of a woman destitute of acknowledged social dignity, spread itself over her visions of a future that might be her own, and made part of her dread on her own behalf. She shrank all the more from any lonely action. What possible release could there be for her from this hated vantage-ground, which yet she dared not quit, any more than if fire had been raining outside it? What release, but death? Not her own death. Gwendolen was not a woman who could easily think of her own death as a near reality, or front for herself the dark entrance on the untried and invisible. It seemed more possible that Grandcourt should die: – and yet not likely. The power of tyranny in him seemed a power of living in the presence of any wish that he should die. The thought that his death was the only possible deliverance for her was one with the thought that deliverance would never come – the double deliverance from the injury with which other beings might reproach her and from the yoke she had brought on her own neck. No! she foresaw him always living, and her own life dominated by him; the 'always' of her young experience not stretching beyond the few immediate years that seemed immeasurably long with her passionate weariness. The thought of his dying would not subsist: it turned as with a dream-change into the terror that she should die with his throttling fingers on her neck avenging that thought. Fantasies moved within her like ghosts, making no break in her more acknowledged consciousness and finding no obstruction in it: dark rays doing their work invisibly in the broad light.

Only an evening or two after that encounter in the Park, there was a grand concert at Klesmer's, who was living rather magnificently now in one of the large houses in Grosvenor Place, a patron and prince among musical professors. Gwendolen had looked forward to this occasion as one on which she was sure to meet Deronda, and she had been meditating how to put a question to him which, without containing a word that she would feel a dislike to utter, would yet be explicit enough for him to understand it. The struggle of opposite feelings would not let her abide by her instinct that the very idea of Deronda's relation to her was a discouragement to any desperate step towards freedom. The next wave of emotion was a longing for some word of his to enforce a resolve. The fact that her opportunities of conversation with him had always to be snatched in the doubtful privacy of large parties, caused her to live through them many times beforehand, imagining how they would take place and what she would say. The irritation was proportionate when no opportunity came; and this evening at Klesmer's she included Deronda in her anger, because he looked as calm as possible at a distance from her, while she was in danger of betraying her impatience to every one who spoke to her. She found her only safety in a chill haughtiness which made Mr Vandernoodt remark that Mrs Grandcourt was becoming a perfect match for her husband. When at last the chances of the evening brought Deronda near her, Sir Hugo and Mrs Raymond were close by and could hear every word she said. No matter: her husband was not near, and her irritation passed without check into a fit of daring which restored the security of her self-possession. Deronda was there at last, and she would compel him to do what she pleased. Already and without effort rather queenly in her air as she stood in her white lace and green leaves, she threw a royal permissiveness into her way of saying, 'I wish you would come and see me tomorrow between five and six, Mr Deronda.'

There could be but one answer at that moment: 'Certainly,' with a tone of obedience.

Afterwards it occurred to Deronda that he would write a note to excuse himself. He had always avoided

making a call at Grandcourt's. But he could not persuade himself to any step that might hurt her, and whether his excuse were taken for indifference or for the affectation of indifference it would be equally wounding. He kept his promise. Gwendolen had declined to ride out on the plea of not feeling well enough, having left her refusal to the last moment when the horses were soon to be at the door – not without alarm lest her husband should say that he too would stay at home. Become almost superstitious about his power of suspicious divination, she had a glancing forethought of what she would do in that case – namely, have herself denied as not well. But Grandcourt accepted her excuse without remark, and rode off.

Nevertheless when Gwendolen found herself alone, and had sent down the order that only Mr Deronda was to be admitted, she began to be alarmed at what she had done, and to feel a growing agitation in the thought that he would soon appear, and she should soon be obliged to speak: not of trivialities, as if she had had no serious motive in asking him to come; and yet what she had been for hours determining to say began to seem impossible. For the first time the impulse of appeal to him was being checked by timidity; and now that it was too late she was shaken by the possibility that he might think her invitation unbecoming. If so, she would have sunk in his esteem. But immediately she resisted this intolerable fear as an infection from her husband's way of thinking. That *he* would say she was making a fool of herself was rather a reason why such a judgment would be remote from Deronda's mind. But that she could not rid herself from this sudden invasion of womanly reticence was manifest in a kind of action which had never occurred to her before. In her struggle between agitation and the effort to suppress it, she was walking up and down the length of two drawing-rooms, where at one end a long mirror reflected her in her black dress, chosen in the early morning with a half-admitted reference to this hour. But above this black dress her head on its white pillar of a neck showed to advantage. Some consciousness of this made her turn hastily and hurry to the boudoir, where again there was glass, but also, tossed over a chair, a large piece of black lace which she snatched and tied over her crown of hair so as completely to conceal her neck, and leave only her face looking out from the black frame. In this manifest contempt of appearance, she thought it possible to be freer from nervousness, but the black lace did not take away the uneasiness from her eyes and lips.

She was standing in the middle of the room when Deronda was announced, and as he approached her she perceived that he too for some reason was not his usual self. She could not have defined the change except by saying that he looked less happy than usual, and appeared to be under some effort in speaking to her. And yet the speaking was the slightest possible. They both said, 'How do you do?' quite curtly; and Gwendolen, instead of sitting down, moved to a little distance, resting her arms slightly on the tall back of a chair, while Deronda stood where he was, – both feeling it difficult to say anything more, though the preoccupation in his mind could hardly have been more remote than it was from Gwendolen's conception. She naturally saw in his embarrassment some reflection of her own. Forced to speak, she found all her training in concealment and self-command of no use to her, and began with timid awkwardness –

'You will wonder why I begged you to come. I wanted to ask you something. You said I was ignorant. That is true. And what can I do but ask you?'

And at this moment she was feeling it utterly impossible to put the questions she had intended. Something new in her nervous manner roused Deronda's anxiety lest there might be a new crisis. He said with the sadness of affection in his voice –

'My only regret is, that I can be of so little use to you.' The words and the tone touched a new spring in her, and she went on with more sense of freedom, yet still not saying anything she had designed to say, and beginning to hurry, that she might somehow arrive at the right words.

'I wanted to tell you that I have always been thinking of your advice, but is it any use? – I can't make myself different, because things about me raise bad feelings – and I must go on – I can alter nothing – it is no use.'

She paused an instant, with the consciousness that she was not finding the right words, but began again as hurriedly, 'But if I go on, I shall get worse. I want not to get worse. I should like to be what you wish. There are people who are good and enjoy great things – I know there are. I am a contemptible creature. I feel as if I should get wicked with hating people. I have tried to think that I would go away from everybody. But I can't. There are so many things to hinder me. You think, perhaps, that I don't mind. But I do mind. I am afraid of everything. I am afraid of getting wicked. Tell me what I can do.'

She had forgotten everything but that image of her helpless misery which she was trying to make present to Deronda in broken allusive speech – wishing to convey but not express all her need. Her eyes were tearless, and had a look of smarting in their dilated brilliancy; there was a subdued sob in her voice which was more and more veiled, till it was hardly above a whisper. She was hurting herself with the jewels that glittered on her tightly-clasped fingers pressed against her heart.

The feeling Deronda endured in these moments he afterwards called horrible. Words seemed to have no more rescue in them than if he had been beholding a vessel in peril of wreck – the poor ship with its many-

lived anguish beaten by the inescapable storm. How could he grasp the long-growing process of this young creature's wretchedness? – how arrest and change it with a sentence? He was afraid of his own voice. The words that rushed into his mind seemed in their feebleness nothing better than despair made audible, or than that insensibility to another's hardship which applies precept to soothe pain. He felt himself holding a crowd of words imprisoned within his lips, as if the letting them escape would be a violation of awe before the mysteries of our human lot. The thought that urged itself foremost was – 'Confess everything to your husband; leave nothing concealed:' – the words carried in his mind a vision of reasons which would have needed much fuller expression for Gwendolen to apprehend them, but before he had begun to utter those brief sentences, the door opened and the husband entered.

Grandcourt had deliberately gone out and turned back to satisfy a suspicion. What he saw was Gwendolen's face of anguish framed black like a nun's and Deronda standing three yards from her with a look of sorrow such as he might have bent on the last struggle of life in a beloved object. Without any show of surprise, Grandcourt nodded to Deronda, gave a second look at Gwendolen, passed on, and seated himself easily at a little distance, crossing his legs, taking out his handkerchief and trifling with it elegantly.

Gwendolen had shrunk and changed her attitude on seeing him, but she did not turn or move from her place. It was not a moment in which she could feign anything, or manifest any strong revulsion of feeling: the passionate movement of her last speech was still too strong within her. What she felt besides was a dull despairing sense that her interview with Deronda was at an end: a curtain had fallen. But he, naturally, was urged into self-possession and effort by susceptibility to what might follow for her from being seen by her husband in this betrayal of agitation; and feeling that any pretence of ease in prolonging his visit would only exaggerate Grandcourt's possible conjectures of duplicity, he merely said –

'I will not stay longer now. Good-bye.'

He put out his hand, and she let him press her poor little chill fingers; but she said no good-bye.

When he had left the room, Gwendolen threw herself into a seat, with an expectation as dull as her despair – the expectation that she was going to be punished. But Grandcourt took no notice; he was satisfied to have let her know that she had not deceived him, and to keep a silence which was formidable with omniscience. He went out that evening, and her plea of feeling ill was accepted without even a sneer.

The next morning at breakfast he said, 'I am going yachting to the Mediterranean.'

'When?' said Gwendolen, with a leap of heart which had hope in it.

'The day after to-morrow. The yacht is at Marseilles. Lush is gone to get everything ready.'

'Shall I have mamma to stay with me, then?' said Gwendolen, the new sudden possibility of peace and affection filling her mind like a burst of morning light.

'No; you will go with me.'

Chapter Forty-Nine

> Ever in his soul
> That larger justice which makes gratitude
> Triumphed above resentment. 'Tis the mark
> Of regal natures, with the wider life,
> And fuller capability of joy: –
> Not wits exultant in the strongest lens
> To show you goodness vanished into pulp
> Never worth 'thank you' – they're the devil's friars,
> Vowed to be poor as he in love and trust,
> Yet must go begging of a world that keeps
> Some human property.

Deronda, in parting from Gwendolen, had abstained from saying, 'I shall not see you again for a long while: I am going away,' lest Grandcourt should understand him to imply that the fact was of importance to her.

He was actually going away under circumstances so momentous to himself that when he set out to fulfil his promise of calling on her, he was already under the shadow of a solemn emotion which revived the deepest experience of his life.

Sir Hugo had sent for him to his chambers with the note – 'Come immediately. Something has happened:' a preparation that caused him some relief when, on entering the baronet's study, he was received with grave affection instead of the distress which he had apprehended.

'It is nothing to grieve you, sir?' said Deronda, in a tone rather of restored confidence than question, as he took the hand held out to him. There was an unusual meaning in Sir Hugo's look, and a subdued emotion in his voice, as he said –

'No, Dan, no. Sit down. I have something to say.'

Deronda obeyed, not without presentiment. It was extremely rare for Sir Hugo to show so much serious feeling.

'Not to grieve me, my boy, no. At least, if there is nothing in it that will grieve you too much. But I hardly expected that this – just this – would ever happen. There have been reasons why I have never prepared you for it. There have been reasons why I have never told you anything about your parentage. But I have striven in every way not to make that an injury to you.'

Sir Hugo paused, but Deronda could not speak. He could not say, 'I have never felt it an injury.' Even if that had been true, he could not have trusted his voice to say anything. Far more than any one but himself could know of was hanging on this moment when the secrecy was to be broken. Sir Hugo had never seen the grand face he delighted in so pale – the lips pressed together with such a look of pain. He went on with a more anxious tenderness, as if he had a new fear of wounding.

'I have acted in obedience to your mother's wishes. The secrecy was her wish. But now she desires to remove it. She desires to see you. I will put this letter into your hands, which you can look at by-and-by. It will merely tell you what she wishes you to do, and where you will find her.'

Sir Hugo held out a letter written on foreign paper, which Deronda thrust into his breast-pocket, with a sense of relief that he was not called on to read anything immediately. The emotion on Daniel's face had gained on the baronet, and was visibly shaking his composure. Sir Hugo found it difficult to say more. And Deronda's whole soul was possessed by a question which was the hardest in the world to utter. Yet he could not bear to delay it. This was a sacramental moment. If he let it pass, he could not recover the influences under which it was possible to utter the words and meet the answer. For some moments his eyes were cast down, and it seemed to both as if thoughts were in the air between them. But at last Deronda looked at Sir Hugo, and said, with a tremulous reverence in his voice – dreading to convey indirectly the reproach that affection had for years been stifling –

'Is my father also living?'

The answer came immediately in a low emphatic tone –

'No.'

In the mingled emotions which followed that answer it was impossible to distinguish joy from pain.

Some new light had fallen on the past for Sir Hugo too in this interview. After a silence in which Deronda felt like one whose creed is gone before he has religiously embraced another, the baronet said, in a tone of confession –

'Perhaps I was wrong, Dan, to undertake what I did. And perhaps I liked it a little too well – having you all to myself. But if you have had any pain which I might have helped, I ask you to forgive me.'

'The forgiveness has long been there,' said Deronda. 'The chief pain has always been on account of some one else – whom I never knew – whom I am now to know. It has not hindered me from feeling an affection for you which has made a large part of all the life I remember.'

It seemed one impulse that made the two men clasp each other's hand for a moment.

BOOK SEVEN

The Mother and the Son

Chapter Fifty

If some mortal, born too soon,
Were laid away in some great trance – the ages
Coming and going all the while – till dawned
His true time's advent; and could then record
The words they spoke who kept watch by his bed, –
Then I might tell more of the breath so light
Upon my eyelids, and the fingers warm
Among my hair. Youth is confused; yet never
So dull was I but, when that spirit passed,
I turned to him, scarce consciously, as turns
A water-snake when fairies cross his sleep.

– *BROWNING:* Paracelsus

This was the letter which Sir Hugo put into Deronda's hands: –

To my son, Daniel Deronda

My good friend and yours, Sir Hugo Mallinger, will have told you that I wish to see you. My health is shaken, and I desire there should be no time lost before I deliver to you what I have long withheld. Let nothing hinder you from being at the *Albergo dell' Italia* in Genoa by the fourteenth of this month. Wait for me there. I am uncertain when I shall be able to make the journey from Spezia, where I shall be staying. That will depend on several things. Wait for me – the Princess Halm-Eberstein. Bring with you the diamond ring that Sir Hugo gave you. I shall like to see it again. – Your unknown mother,

Leonora Halm-Eberstein

This letter with its colourless wording gave Deronda no clue to what was in reserve for him; but he could not do otherwise than accept Sir Hugo's reticence, which seemed to imply some pledge not to anticipate the mother's disclosures; and the discovery that his life-long conjectures had been mistaken checked further surmise. Deronda could not hinder his imagination from taking a quick flight over what seemed possibilities, but he refused to contemplate any one of them as more likely than another, lest he should be nursing it into a dominant desire or repugnance, instead of simply preparing himself with resolve to meet the fact bravely, whatever it might turn out to be.

In this state of mind he could not have communicated to any one the reason for the absence which in some quarters he was obliged to mention beforehand, least of all to Mordecai, whom it would affect as powerfully as it did himself, only in rather a different way. If he were to say, 'I am going to learn the truth about my birth,' Mordecai's hope would gather what might prove a painful, dangerous excitement. To exclude suppositions, he spoke of his journey as being undertaken by Sir Hugo's wish, and threw as much indifference as he could into his manner of announcing it, saying he was uncertain of its duration, but it would perhaps be very short.

'I will ask to have the child Jacob to stay with me,' said Mordecai, comforting himself in this way, after the first mournful glances.

'I will drive round and ask Mrs Cohen to let him come,' said Mirah.

'The grandmother will deny you nothing,' said Deronda. 'I'm glad you were a little wrong as well as I,' he added, smiling at Mordecai. 'You thought that old Mrs Cohen would not bear to see Mirah.'

'I undervalued her heart,' said Mordecai. 'She is capable of rejoicing that another's plant blooms though her own be withered.'

'Oh, they are dear good people; I feel as if we all belonged to each other,' said Mirah, with a tinge of merriment in her smile.

'What should you have felt if that Ezra had been your brother?' said Deronda, mischievously – a little provoked that she had taken kindly at once to people who had caused him so much prospective annoyance on her account.

Mirah looked at him with a slight surprise for a moment, and then said, 'He is not a bad man – I think he would never forsake any one.' But when she had uttered the words she blushed deeply, and glancing timidly at Mordecai, turned away to some occupation. Her father was in her mind, and this was a subject on which she and her brother had a painful mutual consciousness. 'If he should come and find us!' was a thought which

to Mirah sometimes made the street daylight as shadowy as a hunted forest where each turn screened for her an imaginary apparition.

Deronda felt what was her involuntary allusion, and understood the blush. How could he be slow to understand feelings which now seemed nearer than ever to his own? for the words of his mother's letter implied that his filial relation was not to be freed from painful conditions; indeed, singularly enough that letter which had brought his mother nearer as a living reality had thrown her into more remoteness for his affections. The tender yearning after a being whose life might have been the worse for not having his care and love, the image of a mother who had not had all her dues whether of reverence or compassion, had long been secretly present with him in his observation of all the women he had come near. But it seemed now that this picturing of his mother might fit the facts no better than his former conceptions about Sir Hugo. He wondered to find that when this mother's very handwriting had come to him with words holding her actual feeling, his affections had suddenly shrunk into a state of comparative neutrality towards her. A veiled figure with enigmatic speech had thrust away that image which, in spite of uncertainty, his clinging thought had gradually modelled and made the possessor of his tenderness and duteous longing. When he set off to Genoa, the interest really uppermost in his mind had hardly so much relation to his mother as to Mordecai and Mirah.

'God bless you, Dan!' Sir Hugo had said, when they shook hands. 'Whatever else changes for you, it can't change my being the oldest friend you have known, and the one who has all along felt the most for you. I couldn't have loved you better if you'd been my own – only I should have been better pleased with thinking of you always as the future master of the Abbey instead of my fine nephew; and then you would have seen it necessary for you to take a political line. However – things must be as they may.' It was a defensive measure of the baronet's to mingle purposeless remarks with the expression of serious feeling.

When Deronda arrived at the *Italia* in Genoa, no Princess Halm-Eberstein was there; but on the second day there was a letter for him, saying that her arrival might happen within a week, or might be deferred a fortnight and more: she was under circumstances which made it impossible for her to fix her journey more precisely, and she entreated him to wait as patiently as he could.

With this indefinite prospect of suspense on matters of supreme moment to him, Deronda set about the difficult task of seeking amusement on philosophic grounds, as a means of quieting excited feeling and giving patience a lift over a weary road. His former visit to the superb city had been only cursory, and left him much to learn beyond the prescribed round of sight-seeing, by spending the cooler hours in observant wandering about the streets, the quay, and the environs; and he often took a boat that he might enjoy the magnificent view of the city and harbour from the sea. All sights, all subjects, even the expected meeting with his mother, found a central union in Mordecai and Mirah, and the ideas immediately associated with them; and among the thoughts that most filled his mind while his boat was pushing about within view of the grand harbour was that of the multitudinous Spanish Jews centuries ago driven destitute from their Spanish homes, suffered to land from the crowded ships only for brief rest on this grand quay of Genoa, overspreading it with a pall of famine and plague – dying mothers with dying children at their breasts – fathers and sons agaze at each other's haggardness, like groups from a hundred Hunger-towers turned out beneath the mid-day sun. Inevitably, dreamy constructions of a possible ancestry for himself would weave themselves with historic memories which had begun to have a new interest for him on his discovery of Mirah, and now, under the influence of Mordecai, had become irresistibly dominant. He would have sealed his mind against such constructions if it had been possible, and he had never yet fully admitted to himself that he wished the facts to verify Mordecai's conviction: he inwardly repeated that he had no choice in the matter, and that wishing was folly – nay, on the question of parentage, wishing seemed part of that meanness which disowns kinship: it was a disowning by anticipation. What he had to do was simply to accept the fact; and he had really no strong presumption to go upon, now that he was assured of his mistake about Sir Hugo. There had been a resolved concealment which made all inference untrustworthy, and the very name he bore might be a false one. If Mordecai were wrong – if he, the so-called Daniel Deronda, were held by ties entirely aloof from any such course as his friend's pathetic hope had marked out? – he would not say 'I wish;' but he could not help feeling on which side the sacrifice lay.

Across these two importunate thoughts, which he resisted as much as one can resist anything in that unstrung condition which belongs to suspense, there came continually an anxiety which he made no effort to banish – dwelling on it rather with a mournfulness, which often seems to us the best atonement we can make to one whose need we have been unable to meet. The anxiety was for Gwendolen. In the wonderful mixtures of our nature there is a feeling distinct from that exclusive passionate love of which some men and women (by no means all) are capable, which yet is not the same with friendship, nor with a merely benevolent regard, whether admiring or compassionate: a man, say – for it is a man who is here concerned – hardly represents to himself this shade of feeling towards a woman more nearly than in the words, 'I should have loved her, if –:' the 'if' covering some prior growth in the inclinations, or else some circumstances which have made an

inward prohibitory law as a stay against the emotions ready to quiver out of balance. The 'if' in Deronda's case carried reasons of both kinds; yet he had never throughout his relations with Gwendolen been free from the nervous consciousness that there was something to guard against not only on her account but on his own – some precipitancy in the manifestation of impulsive feeling – some ruinous inroad of what is but momentary on the permanent chosen treasure of the heart – some spoiling of her trust, which wrought upon him now as if it had been the retreating cry of a creature snatched and carried out of his reach by swift horsemen or swifter waves, while his own strength was only a stronger sense of weakness. How could his feeling for Gwendolen ever be exactly like his feeling for other women, even when there was one by whose side he desired to stand apart from them? Strangely her figure entered into the pictures of his present and future; strangely (and now it seemed sadly) their two lots had come in contact, hers narrowly personal, his charged with far-reaching sensibilities, perhaps with durable purposes, which were hardly more present to her than the reasons why men migrate are present to the birds that come as usual for the crumbs and find them no more. Not that Deronda was too ready to imagine himself of supreme importance to a woman; but her words of insistance that he 'must remain near her – must not forsake her' – continually recurred to him with the clearness and importunity of imagined sounds, such as Dante has said pierce us like arrows whose points carry the sharpness of pity: –

> *'Lamenti saettaron me diversi*
> *Che di pietà ferrati avean gli strali.'*[17]

Day after day passed, and the very air of Italy seemed to carry the consciousness that war had been declared against Austria, and every day was a hurrying march of crowded Time towards the world-changing battle of Sadowa. Meanwhile, in Genoa, the noons were getting hotter, the converging outer roads getting deeper with white dust, the oleanders in the tubs along the wayside gardens looking more and more like fatigued holiday-makers, and the sweet evening changing her office – scattering abroad those whom the mid-day had sent under shelter, and sowing all paths with happy social sounds, little tinklings of mule-bells and whirrings of thrumbed strings, light footsteps and voices, if not leisurely, then with the hurry of pleasure in them; while the encircling heights, crowned with forts, skirted with fine dwellings and gardens, seemed also to come forth and gaze in fulness of beauty after their long siesta, till all strong colour melted in the stream of moonlight which made the streets a new spectacle with shadows, both still and moving, on cathedral steps and against the façades of massive palaces; and then slowly with the descending moon all sank in deep night and silence, and nothing shone but the port lights of the great Laterna in the blackness below, and the glimmering stars in the blackness above. Deronda, in his suspense, watched this revolving of the days as he might have watched a wonderful clock where the striking of the hours was made solemn with antique figures advancing and retreating in monitory procession, while he still kept his ear open for another kind of signal which would have its solemnity too. He was beginning to sicken of occupation, and found himself contemplating all activity with the aloofness of a prisoner awaiting ransom. In his letters to Mordecai and Hans, he had avoided writing about himself, but he was really getting into that state of mind to which all subjects become personal; and the few books he had brought to make him a refuge in study were becoming unreadable, because the point of view that life would make for him was in that agitating moment of uncertainty which is close upon decision.

Many nights were watched through by him in gazing from the open window of his room on the double, faintly pierced darkness of the sea and the heavens: often in struggling under the oppressive scepticism which represented his particular lot, with all the importance he was allowing Mordecai to give it, as of no more lasting effect than a dream – a set of changes which made passion to him, but beyond his consciousness were no more than an imperceptible difference of mass or shadow; sometimes with a reaction of emotive force which gave even to sustained disappointment, even to the fulfilled demand of sacrifice, the nature of a satisfied energy, and spread over his young future, whatever it might be, the attraction of devoted service; sometimes with a sweet irresistible hopefulness that the very best of human possibilities might befall him – the blending of a complete personal love in one current with a larger duty; and sometimes again in a mood of rebellion (what human creature escapes it?) against things in general because they are thus and not otherwise, a mood in which Gwendolen and her equivocal fate moved as busy images of what was amiss in the world along with the concealments which he had felt as a hardship in his own life, and which were acting in him now under the form of an afflicting doubtfulness about the mother who had announced herself coldly and still kept away.

But at last she was come. One morning in his third week of waiting there was a new kind of knock at the door. A servant in chasseur's livery entered and delivered in French the verbal message that the Princess Halm-Eberstein had arrived, that she was going to rest during the day, but would be obliged if Monsieur would dine early, so as to be at liberty at seven, when she would be able to receive him.

Chapter Fifty-One

She held the spindle as she sat,
Erinna with the thick-coiled mat
Of raven hair and deepest agate eyes,
Gazing with a sad surprise
At surging visions of her destiny –
To spin the byssus drearily
In insect-labour, while the throng
Of gods and men wrought deeds that poets wrought in song.

When Deronda presented himself at the door of his mother's apartment in the *Italia*, he felt some revival of his boyhood with its premature agitations. The two servants in the antechamber looked at him markedly, a little surprised that the doctor their lady had come to consult was this striking young gentleman whose appearance gave even the severe lines of an evening dress the credit of adornment. But Deronda could notice nothing until, the second door being opened, he found himself in the presence of a figure which at the other end of the large room stood awaiting his approach.

She was covered, except as to her face and part of her arms, with black lace hanging loosely from the summit of her whitening hair to the long train stretching from her tall figure. Her arms, naked from the elbow, except for some rich bracelets, were folded before her, and the fine poise of her head made it look handsomer than it really was. But Deronda felt no interval of observation before he was close in front of her, holding the hand she had put out and then raising it to his lips. She still kept her hand in his and looked at him examiningly; while his chief consciousness was that her eyes were piercing and her face so mobile that the next moment she might look like a different person. For even while she was examining him there was a play of the brow and nostril which made a tacit language. Deronda dared no movement, not able to conceive what sort of manifestation her feeling demanded; but he felt himself changing colour like a girl, and yet wondering at his own lack of emotion: he had lived through so many ideal meetings with his mother, and they had seemed more real than this! He could not even conjecture in what language she would speak to him. He imagined it would not be English. Suddenly, she let fall his hand, and placed both hers on his shoulders, while her face gave out a flash of admiration in which every worn line disappeared and seemed to leave a restored youth.

'You are a beautiful creature!' she said in a low melodious voice, with syllables which had what might be called a foreign but agreeable outline. 'I knew you would be.' Then she kissed him on each cheek, and he returned her kisses. But it was something like a greeting between royalties.

She paused a moment, while the lines were coming back into her face, and then said in a colder tone, 'I am your mother. But you can have no love for me.'

'I have thought of you more than of any other being in the world,' said Deronda, his voice trembling nervously.

'I am not like what you thought I was,' said the mother, decisively, withdrawing her hands from his shoulders and folding her arms as before, looking at him as if she invited him to observe her. He had often pictured her face in his imagination as one which had a likeness to his own: he saw some of the likeness now, but amidst more striking differences. She was a remarkable-looking being. What was it that gave her son a painful sense of aloofness? – Her worn beauty had a strangeness in it as if she were not quite a human mother, but a Melusina, who had ties with some world which is independent of ours.

'I used to think that you might be suffering,' said Deronda, anxious above all not to wound her. 'I used to wish that I could be a comfort to you.'

'I *am* suffering. But with a suffering that you can't comfort,' said the Princess, in a harder voice than before, moving to a sofa where cushions had been carefully arranged for her. 'Sit down.' She pointed to a seat near her; and then discerning some distress in Deronda's face, she added, more gently, 'I am not suffering at this moment. I am at ease now. I am able to talk.'

Deronda seated himself and waited for her to speak again. It seemed as if he were in the presence of a mysterious Fate rather than of the longed-for mother. He was beginning to watch her with wonder, from the spiritual distance to which she had thrown him.

'No,' she began; 'I did not send for you to comfort me. I could not know beforehand – I don't know now – what you will feel towards me. I have not the foolish notion that you can love me merely because I am your mother, when you have never seen or heard of me all your life. But I thought I chose something better for you than being with me. I did not think that I deprived you of anything worth having.'

'You cannot wish me to believe that your affection would not have been worth having,' said Deronda, finding that she paused as if she expected him to make some answer.

'I don't mean to speak ill of myself,' said the Princess, with proud impetuosity, 'but I had not much affection to give you. I did not want affection. I had been stifled with it. I wanted to live out the life that was in me, and not to be hampered with other lives. You wonder what I was. I was no princess then.' She rose with a sudden movement, and stood as she had done before. Deronda immediately rose too; he felt breathless.

'No princess in this tame life that I live in now. I was a great singer, and I acted as well as I sang. All the rest were poor beside me. Men followed me from one country to another. I was living a myriad lives in one. I did not want a child.'

There was a passionate self-defence in her tone. She had cast all precedent out of her mind. Precedent had no excuse for her, and she could only seek a justification in the intensest words she could find for her experience. She seemed to fling out the last words against some possible reproach in the mind of her son, who had to stand and hear them – clutching his coat-collar as if he were keeping himself above water by it, and feeling his blood in the sort of commotion that might have been excited if he had seen her going through some strange rite of a religion which gave a sacredness to crime. What else had she to tell him? She went on with the same intensity and a sort of pale illumination in her face.

'I did not want to marry. I was forced into marrying your father – forced, I mean, by my father's wishes and commands; and besides, it was my best way of getting some freedom. I could rule my husband, but not my father. I had a right to be free. I had a right to seek my freedom from a bondage that I hated.'

She seated herself again, while there was that subtle movement in her eyes and closed lips which is like the suppressed continuation of speech. Deronda continued standing, and after a moment or two she looked up at him with a less defiant pleading as she said –

'And the bondage I hated for myself I wanted to keep you from. What better could the most loving mother have done? I relieved you from the bondage of having been born a Jew.'

'Then I *am* a Jew?' Deronda burst out with a deep-voiced energy that made his mother shrink a little backward against her cushions. 'My father was a Jew, and you are a Jewess?'

'Yes, your father was my cousin,' said the mother, watching him with a change in her look, as if she saw something that she might have to be afraid of.

'I am glad of it,' said Deronda, impetuously, in the veiled voice of passion. He could not have imagined beforehand how he would come to say that which he had never hitherto admitted. He could not have dreamed that it would be in impulsive opposition to his mother. He was shaken by a mixed anger which no reflection could come soon enough to check, against this mother who it seemed had borne him unwillingly, had willingly made herself a stranger to him, and – perhaps – was now making herself known unwillingly. This last suspicion seemed to flash some explanation over her speech.

But the mother was equally shaken by an anger differently mixed, and her frame was less equal to any repression. The shaking with her was visibly physical, and her eyes looked the larger for her pallid excitement as she said violently –

'Why do you say you are glad? You are an English gentleman. I secured you that.'

'You did not know *what* you secured me. How could you choose my birthright for me?' said Deronda, throwing himself sideways into his chair again, almost unconsciously, and leaning his arm over the back while he looked away from his mother.

He was fired with an intolerance that seemed foreign to him. But he was now trying hard to master himself and keep silence. A horror had swept in upon his anger lest he should say something too hard in this moment which made an epoch never to be recalled. There was a pause before his mother spoke again, and when she spoke her voice had become more firmly resistant in its finely varied tones:

'I chose for you what I would have chosen for myself. How could I know that you would have the spirit of my father in you? How could I know that you would love what I hated? – if you really love to be a Jew.' The last words had such bitterness in them that any one overhearing might have supposed some hatred had arisen between the mother and son.

But Deronda had recovered his fuller self. He was recalling his sensibilities to what life had been and actually was for her whose best years were gone, and who with the signs of suffering in her frame was now exerting herself to tell him of a past which was not his alone but also hers. His habitual shame at the acceptance of events as if they were his only, helped him even here. As he looked at his mother silently after her last words, his face regained some of its penetrative calm; yet it seemed to have a strangely agitating

influence over her: her eyes were fixed on him with a sort of fascination, but not with any repose of maternal delight.

'Forgive me if I speak hastily,' he said, with diffident gravity. 'Why have you resolved now on disclosing to me what you took care to have me brought up in ignorance of? Why – since you seem angry that I should be glad?'

'Oh – the reasons of our actions!' said the Princess, with a ring of something like sarcastic scorn. 'When you are as old as I am, it will not seem so simple a question – "Why did you do this?" People talk of their motives in a cut and dried way. Every woman is supposed to have the same set of motives, or else to be a monster. I am not a monster, but I have not felt exactly what other women feel – or say they feel, for fear of being thought unlike others. When you reproach me in your heart for sending you away from me, you mean that I ought to say I felt about you as other women say they feel about their children. I did *not* feel that. I was glad to be freed from you. But I did well for you, and I gave you your father's fortune. Do I seem now to be revoking everything? – Well, there are reasons. I feel many things that I can't understand. A fatal illness has been growing in me for a year. I shall very likely not live another year. I will not deny anything I have done. I will not pretend to love where I have no love. But shadows are rising round me. Sickness makes them. If I have wronged the dead – I have but little time to do what I left undone.'

The varied transitions of tone with which this speech was delivered were as perfect as the most accomplished actress could have made them. The speech was in fact a piece of what may be called sincere acting: this woman's nature was one in which all feeling – and all the more when it was tragic as well as real – immediately became matter of conscious representation: experience immediately passed into drama, and she acted her own emotions. In a minor degree this is nothing uncommon, but in the Princess the acting had a rare perfection of physiognomy, voice, and gesture. It would not be true to say that she felt less because of this double consciousness: she felt – that is, her mind went through – all the more, but with a difference: each nucleus of pain or pleasure had a deep atmosphere of the excitement or spiritual intoxication which at once exalts and deadens. But Deronda made no reflection of this kind. All his thoughts hung on the purport of what his mother was saying; her tones and her wonderful face entered into his agitation without being noted. What he longed for with an awed desire was to know as much as she would tell him of the strange mental conflict under which it seemed that he had been brought into the world: what his compassionate nature made the controlling idea within him were the suffering and the confession that breathed through her later words, and these forbade any further question, when she paused and remained silent, with her brow knit, her head turned a little away from him, and her large eyes fixed as if on something incorporeal. He must wait for her to speak again. She did so with strange abruptness, turning her eyes upon him suddenly, and saying more quickly –

'Sir Hugo has written much about you. He tells me you have a wonderful mind – you comprehend everything – you are wiser than he is with all his sixty years. You say you are glad to know that you were born a Jew. I am not going to tell you that I have changed my mind about that. Your feelings are against mine. You don't thank me for what I did. Shall you comprehend your mother – or only blame her?'

'There is not a fibre within me but makes me wish to comprehend her,' said Deronda, meeting her sharp gaze solemnly. 'It is a bitter reversal of my longing to think of blaming her. What I have been most trying to do for fifteen years is to have some understanding of those who differ from myself.'

'Then you have become unlike your grandfather in that,' said the mother, 'though you are a young copy of him in your face. He never comprehended me, or if he did, he only thought of fettering me into obedience. I was to be what he called "the Jewish woman" under pain of his curse. I was to feel everything I did not feel, and believe everything I did not believe. I was to feel awe for the bit of parchment in the *mezuza* over the door; to dread lest a bit of butter should touch a bit of meat; to think it beautiful that men should bind the *tephillin* on them, and women not, – to adore the wisdom of such laws, however silly they might seem to me. I was to love the long prayers in the ugly synagogue, and the howling, and the gabbling, and the dreadful fasts, and the tiresome feasts, and my father's endless discoursing about Our People, which was a thunder without meaning in my ears. I was to care for ever about what Israel had been; and I did not care at all. I cared for the wide world, and all that I could represent in it. I hated living under the shadow of my father's strictness. Teaching, teaching for everlasting – "this you must be," "that you must not be" – pressed on me like a frame that got tighter and tighter as I grew. I wanted to live a large life, with freedom to do what every one else did, and be carried along in a great current, not obliged to care. Ah!' – here her tone changed to one of a more bitter incisiveness – 'you are glad to have been born a Jew. You say so. That is because you have not been brought up as a Jew. That separateness seems sweet to you because I saved you from it.'

'When you resolved on that, you meant that I should never know my origin?' said Deronda, impulsively. 'You have at least changed in your feeling on that point.'

'Yes, that was what I meant. That is what I persevered in. And it is not true to say that I have changed. Things have changed in spite of me. I am still the same Leonora' – she pointed with her forefinger to her

breast – 'here within me is the same desire, the same will, the same choice, *but*' – she spread out her hands, palm upwards, on each side of her, as she paused with a bitter compression of her lip, then let her voice fall into muffled, rapid utterance – 'events come upon us like evil enchantments: and thoughts, feelings, apparitions in the darkness are events – are they not? I don't consent. We only consent to what we love. I obey something tyrannic' – she spread out her hands again – 'I am forced to be withered, to feel pain, to be dying slowly. Do I love that? Well, I have been forced to obey my dead father. I have been forced to tell you that you are a Jew, and deliver to you what he commanded me to deliver.'

'I beseech you to tell me what moved you – when you were young, I mean – to take the course you did,' said Deronda, trying by this reference to the past to escape from what to him was the heart-rending piteousness of this mingled suffering and defiance. 'I gather that my grandfather opposed your bent to be an artist. Though my own experience has been quite different, I enter into the painfulness of your struggle. I can imagine the hardship of an enforced renunciation.'

'No,' said the Princess, shaking her head, and folding her arms with an air of decision. 'You are not a woman. You may try – but you can never imagine what it is to have a man's force of genius in you, and yet to suffer the slavery of being a girl. To have a pattern cut out – "this is the Jewish woman; this is what you must be; this is what you are wanted for; a woman's heart must be of such a size and no larger, else it must be pressed small, like Chinese feet; her happiness is to be made as cakes are, by a fixed receipt." That was what my father wanted. He wished I had been a son; he cared for me as a makeshift link. His heart was set on his Judaism. He hated that Jewish women should be thought of by the Christian world as a sort of ware to make public singers and actresses of. As if we were not the more enviable for that! That is a chance of escaping from bondage.'

'Was my grandfather a learned man?' said Deronda, eager to know particulars that he feared his mother might not think of.

She answered impatiently, putting up her hand, 'Oh yes, – and a clever physician – and good: I don't deny that he was good. A man to be admired in a play – grand, with an iron will. Like the old Foscari before he pardons. But such men turn their wives and daughters into slaves. They would rule the world if they could; but not ruling the world, they throw all the weight of their will on the necks and souls of women. But nature sometimes thwarts them. My father had no other child than his daughter, and she was like himself.'

She had folded her arms again, and looked as if she were ready to face some impending attempt at mastery.

'Your father was different. Unlike me – all lovingness and affection. I knew I could rule him; and I made him secretly promise me, before I married him, that he would put no hindrance in the way of my being an artist. My father was on his deathbed when we were married: from the first he had fixed his mind on my marrying my cousin Ephraim. And when a woman's will is as strong as the man's who wants to govern her, half her strength must be concealment. I meant to have my will in the end, but I could only have it by seeming to obey. I had an awe of my father – always I had had an awe of him: it was impossible to help it. I hated to feel awed – I wished I could have defied him openly; but I never could. It was what I could not imagine: I could not act it to myself that I should begin to defy my father openly and succeed. And I never would risk failure.'

That last sentence was uttered with an abrupt emphasis, and she paused after it as if the words had raised a crowd of remembrances which obstructed speech. Her son was listening to her with feelings more and more highly mixed: the first sense of being repelled by the frank coldness which had replaced all his preconceptions of a mother's tender joy in the sight of him; the first impulses of indignation at what shocked his most cherished emotions and principles – all these busy elements of collision between them were subsiding for a time, and making more and more room for that effort at just allowance and that admiration of a forcible nature whose errors lay along high pathways, which he would have felt if, instead of being his mother, she had been a stranger who had appealed to his sympathy. Still it was impossible to be dispassionate: he trembled lest the next thing she had to say would be more repugnant to him than what had gone before: he was afraid of the strange coercion she seemed to be under to lay her mind bare: he almost wished he could say, 'Tell me only what is necessary,' and then again he felt the fascination that made him watch her and listen to her eagerly. He tried to recall her to particulars by asking –

'Where was my grandfather's home?'

'Here in Genoa, when I was married; and his family had lived here generations ago. But my father had been in various countries.'

'You must surely have lived in England?'

'My mother was English – a Jewess of Portuguese descent. My father married her in England. Certain circumstances of that marriage made all the difference in my life: through that marriage my father thwarted his own plans. My mother's sister was a singer, and afterwards she married the English partner of a merchant's house here in Genoa, and they came and lived here eleven years. My mother died when I was eight years old,

and then my father allowed me to be continually with my aunt Leonora and be taught under her eyes, as if he had not minded the danger of her encouraging my wish to be a singer, as she had been. But this was it – I saw it again and again in my father: – he did not guard against consequences, because he felt sure he could hinder them if he liked. Before my aunt left Genoa, I had had enough teaching to bring out the born singer and actress within me: my father did not know everything that was done; but he knew that I was taught music and singing – he knew my inclination. That was nothing to him: he meant that I should obey his will. And he was resolved that I should marry my cousin Ephraim, the only one left of my father's family that he knew. I wanted not to marry. I thought of all plans to resist it, but at last I found that I could rule my cousin, and I consented. My father died three weeks after we were married, and then I had my way!' She uttered these words almost exultantly; but after a little pause her face changed, and she said in a biting tone, 'It has not lasted, though. My father is getting his way now.'

She began to look more contemplatively again at her son, and presently said –

'You are like him – but milder – there is something of your own father in you; and he made it the labour of his life to devote himself to me: wound up his money-changing and banking, and lived to wait upon me – he went against his conscience for me. As I loved the life of my art, so he loved me. Let me look at your hand again: the hand with the ring on. It was your father's ring.'

He drew his chair nearer to her and gave her his hand. We know what kind of hand it was: her own, very much smaller, was of the same type. As he felt the smaller hand holding his, as he saw nearer to him the face that held the likeness of his own, aged not by time but by intensity, the strong bent of his nature towards a reverential tenderness asserted itself above every other impression, and in his most fervent tone he said –

'Mother! take us all into your heart – the living, and the dead. Forgive everything that hurts you in the past. Take my affection.'

She looked at him admiringly rather than lovingly, then kissed him on the brow, and saying sadly, 'I reject nothing, but I have nothing to give,' she released his hand and sank back on her cushions. Deronda turned pale with what seems always more of a sensation than an emotion – the pain of repulsed tenderness. She noticed the expression of pain, and said, still with melodious melancholy in her tones –

'It is better so. We must part again soon, and you owe me no duties. I did not wish you to be born. I parted with you willingly. When your father died, I resolved that I would have no more ties, but such as I could free myself from. I was the Alcharisi you have heard of: the name had magic wherever it was carried. Men courted me. Sir Hugo Mallinger was one who wished to marry me. He was madly in love with me. One day I asked him, "Is there a man capable of doing something for love of me, and expecting nothing in return?" He said, "What is it you want done?" I said, "Take my boy and bring him up as an Englishman, and let him never know anything about his parents." You were little more than two years old, and were sitting on his foot. He declared that he would pay money to have such a boy. I had not meditated much on the plan beforehand, but as soon as I had spoken about it, it took possession of me as something I could not rest without doing. At first he thought I was not serious, but I convinced him, and he was never surprised at anything. He agreed that it would be for your good, and the finest thing for you. A great singer and actress is a queen, but she gives no royalty to her son. – All that happened at Naples. And afterwards I made Sir Hugo the trustee of your fortune. That is what I did; and I had a joy in doing it. My father had tyrannised over me – he cared more about a grandson to come than he did about me: I counted as nothing. You were to be such a Jew as he; you were to be what he wanted. But you were my son, and it was my turn to say what you should be. I said you should not know you were a Jew.'

'And for months events have been preparing me to be glad that I am a Jew,' said Deronda, his opposition roused again. The point touched the quick of his experience. 'It would always have been better that I should have known the truth. I have always been rebelling against the secrecy that looked like shame. It is no shame to have Jewish parents – the shame is to disown it.'

'You say it was a shame to me, then, that I used that secrecy,' said his mother, with a flash of new anger. 'There is no shame attaching to me. I have no reason to be ashamed. I rid myself of the Jewish tatters and gibberish that make people nudge each other at sight of us, as if we were tattoed under our clothes, though our faces are as whole as theirs. I delivered you from the pelting contempt that pursues Jewish separateness. I am not ashamed that I did it. It was the better for you.'

'Then why have you now undone the secrecy? – no, not undone it – the effects will never be undone. But why have you now sent for me to tell me that I am a Jew?' said Deronda, with an intensity of opposition in feeling that was almost bitter. It seemed as if her words had called out a latent obstinacy of race in him.

'Why? – ah why?' said the Princess, rising quickly and walking to the other side of the room, where she turned round and slowly approached him, as he, too, stood up. Then she began to speak again in a more veiled voice. 'I can't explain; I can only say what is. I don't love my father's religion now any more than I did then. Before I married the second time I was baptised; I made myself like the people I lived among. I had a

right to do it; I was not like a brute, obliged to go with my own herd. I have not repented; I will not say that I have repented. But yet,' – here she had come near to her son, and paused; then again retreated a little and stood still, as if resolute not to give way utterly to an imperious influence; but, as she went on speaking, she became more and more unconscious of anything but the awe that subdued her voice. 'It is illness, I don't doubt that it has been gathering illness, – my mind has gone back; more than a year ago it began. You see my grey hair, my worn look: it has all come fast. Sometimes I am in an agony of pain – I daresay I shall be to-night. Then it is as if all the life I have chosen to live, all thoughts, all will, forsook me and left me alone in spots of memory, and I can't get away: my pain seems to keep me there. My childhood – my girlhood – the day of my marriage – the day of my father's death – there seems to be nothing since. Then a great horror comes over me: what do I know of life or death? and what my father called "right" may be a power that is laying hold of me – that is clutching me now. Well, I will satisfy him. I cannot go into the darkness without satisfying him. I have hidden what was his. I thought once I would burn it. I have not burnt it. I thank God I have not burnt it!'

She threw herself on her cushions again, visibly fatigued. Deronda, moved too strongly by her suffering for other impulses to act within him, drew near her, and said, entreatingly –

'Will you not spare yourself this evening? Let us leave the rest till to-morrow.'

'No,' she said, decisively. 'I will confess it all, now that I have come up to it. Often when I am at ease it all fades away; my whole self comes quite back; but I know it will sink away again, and the other will come – the poor, solitary, forsaken remains of self, that can resist nothing. It was my nature to resist, and say, "I have a right to resist." Well, I say so still when I have any strength in me. You have heard me say it, and I don't withdraw it. But when my strength goes, some other right forces itself upon me like iron in an inexorable hand; and even when I am at ease, it is beginning to make ghosts upon the daylight. And now you have made it worse for me,' she said, with a sudden return of impetuosity; 'but I shall have told you everything. And what reproach is there against me,' she added, bitterly, 'since I have made you glad to be a Jew? Joseph Kalonymos reproached me: he said you had been turned into a proud Englishman, who resented being touched by a Jew. I wish you had!' she ended, with a new marvellous alternation. It was as if her mind were breaking into several, one jarring the other into impulsive action.

'Who is Joseph Kalonymos?' said Deronda, with a darting recollection of that Jew who touched his arm in the Frankfort synagogue.

'Ah! some vengeance sent him back from the East, that he might see you and come to reproach me. He was my father's friend. He knew of your birth: he knew of my husband's death, and once, twenty years ago, after he had been away in the Levant, he came to see me and inquire about you. I told him that you were dead: I meant you to be dead to all the world of my childhood. If I had said you were living, he would have interfered with my plans: he would have taken on him to represent my father, and have tried to make me recall what I had done. What could I do but say you were dead? The act was done. If I had told him of it there would have been trouble and scandal – and all to conquer me, who would not have been conquered. I was strong then, and I would have had my will, though there might have been a hard fight against me. I took the way to have it without any fight. I felt then that I was not really deceiving: it would have come to the same in the end; or if not to the same, to something worse. He believed me, and begged that I would give up to him the chest that my father had charged me and my husband to deliver to our eldest son. I knew what was in the chest – things that had been dinned in my ears since I had had any understanding – things that were thrust on my mind that I might feel them like a wall around my life – my life that was growing like a tree. Once, after my husband died, I was going to burn the chest. But it was difficult to burn; and burning a chest and papers looks like a shameful act. I have committed no shameful act – except what Jews would call shameful. I had kept the chest, and I gave it to Joseph Kalonymos. He went away mournful, and said, "If you marry again, and if another grandson is born to him who is departed, I will deliver up the chest to him." I bowed in silence. I meant not to marry again – no more than I meant to be the shattered woman that I am now.'

She ceased speaking, and her head sank back while she looked vaguely before her. Her thought was travelling through the years, and when she began to speak again her voice had lost its argumentative spirit, and had fallen into a veiled tone of distress.

'But months ago this Kalonymos saw you in the synagogue at Frankfort. He saw you enter the hotel, and he went to ask your name. There was nobody else in the world to whom the name would have told anything about me.'

'Then it is not my real name?' said Deronda, with a dislike even to this trifling part of the disguise which had been thrown round him.

'Oh, as real as another,' said his mother, indifferently. 'The Jews have always been changing their names. My father's family had kept the name of Charisi: my husband was a Charisi. When I came out as a singer, we made it Alcharisi. But there had been a branch of the family my father had lost sight of who called themselves

Deronda, and when I wanted a name for you, and Sir Hugo said, 'Let it be a foreign name,' I thought of Deronda. But Joseph Kalonymos had heard my father speak of the Deronda branch, and the name confirmed his suspicion. He began to suspect what had been done. It was as if everything had been whispered to him in the air. He found out where I was. He took a journey into Russia to see me; he found me weak and shattered. He had come back again, with his white hair, and with rage in his soul against me. He said I was going down to the grave clad in falsehood and robbery – falsehood to my father and robbery of my own child. He accused me of having kept the knowledge of your birth from you, and having brought you up as if you had been the son of an English gentleman. Well, it was true; and twenty years before I would have maintained that I had a right to do it. But I can maintain nothing now. No faith is strong within me. My father may have God on his side. This man's words were like lion's teeth upon me. My father's threats eat into me with my pain. If I tell everything – if I deliver up everything – what else can be demanded of me? I cannot make myself love the people I have never loved – is it not enough that I lost the life I did love?'

She had leaned forward a little in her low-toned pleading, that seemed like a smothered cry: her arms and hands were stretched out at full length, as if strained in beseeching. Deronda's soul was absorbed in the anguish of compassion. He could not mind now that he had been repulsed before. His pity made a flood of forgiveness within him. His single impulse was to kneel by her and take her hand gently between his palms, while he said in that exquisite voice of soothing which expresses oneness with the sufferer –

'Mother, take comfort!'

She did not seem inclined to repulse him now, but looked down at him and let him take both her hands to fold between his. Gradually tears gathered, but she pressed her handkerchief against her eyes and then leaned her cheek against his brow, as if she wished that they should not look at each other.

'Is it not possible that I could be near you often and comfort you?' said Deronda. He was under that stress of pity that propels us on sacrifices.

'No, not possible,' she answered, lifting up her head again and withdrawing her hand as if she wished him to move away. 'I have a husband and five children. None of them know of your existence.'

Deronda felt painfully silenced. He rose and stood at a little distance.

'You wonder why I married,' she went on presently, under the influence of a newly-recurring thought. 'I meant never to marry again. I meant to be free, and to live for my art. I had parted with you. I had no bonds. For nine years I was a queen. I enjoyed the life I had longed for. But something befell me. It was like a fit of forgetfulness. I began to sing out of tune. They told me of it. Another woman was thrusting herself in my place. I could not endure the prospect of failure and decline. It was horrible to me.' She started up again, with a shudder, and lifted screening hands like one who dreads missiles. 'It drove me to marry. I made believe that I preferred being the wife of a Russian noble to being the greatest lyric actress of Europe; I made believe – I acted that part. It was because I felt my greatness sinking away from me, as I feel my life sinking now. I would not wait till men said, "She had better go." '

She sank into her seat again, and looked at the evening sky as she went on: 'I repented. It was a resolve taken in desperation. That singing out of tune was only like a fit of illness; it went away. I repented; but it was too late. I could not go back. All things hindered me – all things.'

A new haggardness had come in her face, but her son refrained from again urging her to leave further speech till the morrow: there was evidently some mental relief for her in an outpouring such as she could never have allowed herself before. He stood still while she maintained silence longer than she knew, and the light was perceptibly fading. At last she turned to him and said –

'I can bear no more now.' She put out her hand, but then quickly withdrew it saying, 'Stay. How do I know that I can see you again? I cannot bear to be seen when I am in pain.'

She drew forth a pocket-book, and taking out a letter said, 'This is addressed to the banking-house in Mainz, where you are to go for your grandfather's chest. It is a letter written by Joseph Kalonymos: if he is not there himself, this order of his will be obeyed.'

When Deronda had taken the letter, she said, with effort, but more gently than before, 'Kneel again, and let me kiss you.'

He obeyed, and holding his head between her hands she kissed him solemnly on the brow. 'You see I had no life left to love you with,' she said, in a low murmur. 'But there is more fortune for you. Sir Hugo was to keep it in reserve. I gave you all your father's fortune. They can never accuse me of robbery there.'

'If you had needed anything I would have worked for you,' said Deronda, conscious of a disappointed yearning – a shutting out for ever from long early vistas of affectionate imagination.

'I need nothing that the skill of man can give me,' said his mother, still holding his head, and perusing his features. 'But perhaps now I have satisfied my father's will, your face will come instead of his – your young, loving face.'

'But you will see me again?' said Deronda, anxiously.

‘Yes – perhaps. Wait, wait. Leave me now.’

Chapter Fifty-Two

La même fermeté qui sert à résister à l'amour sert aussi à le rendre violent et durable; et les personnes foibles qui sont toujours agitées des passions n'en sont presque jamais véritablement remplies.

– LA ROCHEFOUCAULD[18]

Among Deronda's letters the next morning was one from Hans Meyrick of four quarto pages, in the small beautiful handwriting which ran in the Meyrick family.

My dear Deronda, – In return for your sketch of Italian movements and your view of the world's affairs generally, I may say that here at home the most judicious opinion going as to the effects of present causes is that 'time will show.' As to the present causes of past effects, it is now seen that the late swindling telegrams account for the last year's cattle plague – which is a refutation of philosophy falsely so called, and justifies the compensation to the farmers. My own idea that a murrain will shortly break out in the commercial class, and that the cause will subsequently disclose itself in the ready sale of all rejected pictures, has been called an unsound use of analogy; but there are minds that will not hesitate to rob even the neglected painter of his solace. To my feeling there is great beauty in the conception that some bad judge might give a high price for my Berenice series, and that the men in the city would have already been punished for my ill-merited luck.

Meanwhile I am consoling myself for your absence by finding my advantage in it – shining like Hesperus when Hyperion has departed – sitting with our Hebrew prophet, and making a study of his head, in the hours when he used to be occupied with you – getting credit with him as a learned young Gentile, who would have been a Jew if he could – and agreeing with him in the general principle, that whatever is best is for that reason Jewish. I never held it my *forte* to be a severe reasoner, but I can see that if whatever is best is A and B happens to be best, B must be A, however little you might have expected it beforehand. On that principle, I could see the force of a pamphlet I once read to prove that all good art was Protestant. However, our prophet is an uncommonly interesting sitter – a better model than Rembrandt had for his Rabbi – and I never come away from him without a new discovery. For one thing, it is a constant wonder to me that, with all his fiery feeling for his race and their traditions, he is no strait-laced Jew, spitting after the word Christian, and enjoying the prospect that the Gentile mouth will water in vain for a slice of the roasted Leviathan, while Israel will be sending up plates for more, *ad libitum*. (You perceive that my studies had taught me what to expect from the orthodox Jew.) I confess that I have always held lightly by your account of Mordecai, as apologetic, and merely part of your disposition to take an antediluvian point of view lest you should do injustice to the megatherium. But now I have given ear to him in his proper person, I find him really a sort of philosophical-allegorical-mystical believer, and yet with a sharp dialectic point, so that any argumentative rattler of peas in a bladder might soon be pricked into silence by him. The mixture may be one of the Jewish prerogatives, for what I know. In fact, his mind seems so broad that I find my own correct opinions lying in it quite commodiously, and how they are to be brought into agreement with the vast remainder is his affair, not mine. I leave it to him to settle our basis, never yet having seen a basis which is not a world-supporting elephant, more or less powerful and expensive to keep. My means will not allow me to keep a private elephant. I go into mystery instead, as cheaper and more lasting – a sort of gas which is likely to be continually supplied by the decomposition of the elephants. And if I like the look of an opinion, I treat it civilly, without suspicious inquiries. I have quite a friendly feeling towards Mordecai's notion that a whole Christian is three-fourths a Jew, and that from the Alexandrian time downward, the most comprehensive minds have been Jewish; for I think of pointing out to Mirah that, Arabic and other accidents of life apart, there is really little difference between me and – Maimonides. But I have lately been finding out that it is your shallow lover who can't help making a declaration. If Mirah's ways were less distracting, and it were less of a heaven to be in her presence and watch her, I must long ago have flung myself at her feet, and requested her to tell me, with less indirectness, whether she wished me to blow my brains out. I have a knack of hoping, which is as good as an estate in reversion, if one can keep from the temptation of turning it into certainty, which may spoil all. My Hope wanders among the orchard-blossoms, feels the warm snow falling on it through the sunshine, and is in doubt of nothing; but, catching sight of Certainty in the distance, sees an ugly Janus-faced deity, with a dubious wink on the hither side of him, and turns quickly away. But you, with your supreme reasonableness, and self-nullification, and preparation for the worst – you know nothing about Hope, that immortal delicious maiden, for ever courted, for ever propitious, whom fools have called deceitful, as if it were Hope that carried the cup of disappointment, whereas it is her deadly enemy Certainty, whom she only escapes by transformation. (You observe my new vein of allegory?) Seriously, however, I must be permitted to allege that truth will prevail, that prejudice will melt before it, that diversity, accompanied by merit, will make itself felt as fascination, and that no virtuous aspiration will be frustrated – all which, if I mistake not, are doctrines of the schools, and all imply that the Jewess I prefer will prefer me. Any blockhead can cite generalities, but the master-mind discerns the particular cases they represent.

I am less convinced that my society makes amends to Mordecai for your absence, but another substitute occasionally comes in the form of Jacob Cohen. It is worth while to catch our prophet's expression when he has that remarkable type of young Israel on his knee, and pours forth some Semitic inspiration with a sublime look of melancholy patience and devoutness. Sometimes it occurs to Jacob that Hebrew will be more edifying to him if he stops his ears with his palms, and imitates the venerable sounds as heard through that muffling medium. When Mordecai gently draws down the little fists and holds them fast, Jacob's features all take on an extraordinary activity, very much as if he were walking through a menagerie and trying to imitate every animal in turn, succeeding best with the owl and the peccary. But I daresay you have seen something of this. He treats me with the easiest familiarity, and seems in general to look at me as a second-hand Christian commodity, likely to come down in price; remarking on my disadvantages with a frankness which seems to imply some thoughts of future purchase. It is pretty, though, to see the change in him if Mirah happens to come in. He turns child suddenly – his age usually strikes one as being like the Israelitish garments in the desert, perhaps near forty, yet with an air of recent production. But, with Mirah, he reminds me of the dogs that have been brought up by women, and remain manageable by them only. Still, the dog is fond of Mordecai too, and brings sugar-plums to share with him, filling his own mouth to rather an embarrassing extent, and watching how Mordecai deals with a smaller supply. Judging from this modern Jacob at the age of six, my astonishment is that his race has not bought us all up long ago, and pocketed our feebler generations in the form of stock and scrip, as so much slave property. There is one Jewess I should not mind being slave to. But I wish I did not imagine that Mirah gets a little sadder, and tries all the while to hide it. It is natural enough, of course, while she has to watch the slow death of this brother, whom she has taken to worshipping with such looks of loving

devoutness that I am ready to wish myself in his place.

For the rest, we are a little merrier than usual. Rex Gascoigne – you remember a head you admired among my sketches, a fellow with a good upper lip, reading law – has got some rooms in town now not far off us, and has had a neat sister (upper lip also good) staying with him the last fortnight. I have introduced them both to my mother and the girls, who have found out from Miss Gascoigne that she is cousin to your Vandyke duchess!!! I put the notes of exclamation to mark the surprise that the information at first produced on my feeble understanding. On reflection I discovered that there was not the least ground for surprise, unless I had beforehand believed that nobody could be anybody's cousin without my knowing it. This sort of surprise, I take it, depends on a liveliness of the spine, with a more or less constant nullity of brain. There was a fellow I used to meet at Rome who was in an effervescence of surprise at contact with the simplest information. Tell him what you would – that you were fond of easy boots – he would always say, 'No! *are* you?' with the same energy of wonder: the very fellow of whom pastoral Browne wrote prophetically –

> 'A wretch so empty that if e'er there be
> In nature found the least vacuity
> 'Twill be in him.'

I have accounted for it all – he had a lively spine.

However, this cousinship with the duchess came out by chance one day that Mirah was with them at home and they were talking about the Mallingers. *Apropos*; I am getting so important that I have rival invitations. Gascoigne wants me to go down with him to his father's rectory in August and see the country round there. But I think self-interest well understood will take me to Topping Abbey, for Sir Hugo has invited me, and proposes – God bless him for his rashness! – that I should make a picture of his three daughters sitting on a bank – as he says, in the Gainsborough style. He came to my studio the other day and recommended me to apply myself to portrait. Of course I know what that means. – 'My good fellow, your attempts at the historic and poetic are simply pitiable. Your brush is just that of a successful portrait-painter – it has a little truth and a great facility in falsehood – your idealism will never do for gods and goddesses and heroic story, but it may fetch a high price as flattery. Fate, my friend, has made you the hinder wheel – *rota posterior curras, et in axe secundo*[19] – run behind, because you can't help it.' – What great effort it evidently costs our friends to give us these candid opinions! I have even known a man take the trouble to call, in order to tell me that I had irretrievably exposed my want of judgment in treating my subject, and that if I had asked him he would have lent me his own judgment. Such was my ingratitude and my readiness at composition, that even while he was speaking I inwardly sketched a Last Judgment with that candid friend's physiognomy on the left. But all this is away from Sir Hugo, whose manner of implying that one's gifts are not of the highest order is so exceedingly good-natured and comfortable that I begin to feel it an advantage not to be among those poor fellows at the tip-top. And his kindness to me tastes all the better because it comes out of his love for you, old boy. His chat is uncommonly amusing. By the way, he told me that your Vandyke duchess is gone with her husband yachting to the Mediterranean. I bethink me that it is possible to land from a yacht, or to be taken on to a yacht from the land. Shall you by chance have an opportunity of continuing your theological discussion with the fair Supralapsarian – I think you said her tenets were of that complexion? Is Duke Alphonso also theological? – perhaps an Arian who objects to triplicity. (Stage direction. While D. is reading, a profound scorn gathers in his face till at the last word he flings down the letter, grasps his coat-collar in a statuesque attitude and so remains with a look generally tremendous, throughout the following soliloquy, 'O night, O blackness, &c. &c.')

Excuse the brevity of this letter. You are not used to more from me than a bare statement of facts, without comment or digression. One fact I have omitted – that the Klesmers on the eve of departure have behaved magnificently, shining forth as might be expected from the planets of genius and fortune in conjunction. Mirah is rich with their oriental gifts.

What luck it will be if you come back and present yourself at the Abbey while I am there! I am going to behave with consummate discretion and win golden opinions. But I shall run up to town now and then, just for a peep into Gan Eden. You see how far I have got in Hebrew lore – up with my Lord Bolingbroke, who knew no Hebrew, but 'understood that sort of learning and what is writ about it.' If Mirah commanded, I would go to a depth below the tri-literal roots. Already it makes no difference to me whether the points are there or not. But while her brother's life lasts I suspect she would not listen to a lover, even one whose 'hair is like a flock of goats on Mount Gilead' – and I flatter myself that few heads would bear that trying comparison better than mine. So I stay with my hope among the orchard-blossoms. – Your devoted

Hans Meyrick

Some months before, this letter from Hans would have divided Deronda's thoughts irritatingly: its romancing about Mirah would have had an unpleasant edge, scarcely anointed with any commiseration for his friend's probable disappointment. But things had altered since March. Mirah was no longer so critically placed with regard to the Meyricks, and Deronda's own position had been undergoing a change which had just been crowned by the revelation of his birth. The new opening towards the future, though he would not trust in any definite visions, inevitably shed new lights, and influenced his mood towards past and present; hence, what Hans called his hope now seemed to Deronda, not a mischievous unreasonableness which roused his indignation, but an unusually persistent bird-dance of an extravagant fancy, and he would have felt quite able to pity any consequent suffering of his friend's, if he had believed in the suffering as probable. But some of the busy thought filling that long day, which passed without his receiving any new summons from his mother, was given to the argument that Hans Meyrick's nature was not one in which love could strike the deep roots that turn disappointment into sorrow: it was too restless, too readily excitable by novelty, too ready to turn itself into imaginative material, and wear its grief as a fantastic costume. 'Already he is beginning to play at love: he is taking the whole affair as a comedy,' said Deronda to himself; 'he knows very well that there is no chance for him. Just like him – never opening his eyes on any possible objection I could have to receive his outpourings about Mirah. Poor old Hans! If we were under a fiery hail together he would howl like a Greek, and if I did not howl too it would never occur to him that I was as badly off as he. And yet he is tender-hearted and affectionate in intention, and I can't say that he is not active in imagining what goes on in other people – but then he always imagines it to fit his own inclination.'

With this touch of causticity Deronda got rid of the slight heat at present raised by Hans's *naïve* expansiveness. The nonsense about Gwendolen, conveying the fact that she was gone yachting with her husband, only suggested a disturbing sequel to his own strange parting with her. But there was one sentence

in the letter which raised a more immediate, active anxiety. Hans's suspicion of a hidden sadness in Mirah was not in the direction of his wishes, and hence, instead of distrusting his observation here, Deronda began to conceive a cause for the sadness. Was it some event that had occurred during his absence, or only the growing fear of some event? Was it something, perhaps alterable, in the new position which had been made for her? Or – had Mordecai, against his habitual resolve, communicated to her those peculiar cherished hopes about him, Deronda, and had her quickly sensitive nature been hurt by the discovery that her brother's will or tenacity of visionary conviction had acted coercively on their friendship – been hurt by the fear that there was more of pitying self-suppression than of equal regard in Deronda's relation to him? For amidst all Mirah's quiet renunciation, the evident thirst of soul with which she received the tribute of equality implied a corresponding pain if she found that what she had taken for a purely reverential regard towards her brother had its mixture of condescension.

In this last conjecture of Deronda's he was not wrong as to the quality in Mirah's nature on which he was founding – the latent protest against the treatment she had all her life been subject to until she met him. For that gratitude which would not let her pass by any notice of their acquaintance without insisting on the depth of her debt to him, took half its fervour from the keen comparison with what others had thought enough to render to her. Deronda's affinity in feeling enabled him to penetrate such secrets. But he was not near the truth in admitting the idea that Mordecai had broken his characteristic reticence. To no soul but Deronda himself had he yet breathed the history of their relation to each other, or his confidence about his friend's origin: it was not only that these subjects were for him too sacred to be spoken of without weighty reason, but that he had discerned Deronda's shrinking at any mention of his birth; and the severity of reserve which had hindered Mordecai from answering a question on a private affair of the Cohen family told yet more strongly here.

'Ezra, how is it?' Mirah one day said to him – 'I am continually going to speak to Mr Deronda as if he were a Jew?'

He smiled at her quietly, and said, 'I suppose it is because he treats us as if he were our brother. But he loves not to have the difference of birth dwelt upon.'

'He has never lived with his parents, Mr Hans says,' continued Mirah, to whom this was necessarily a question of interest about every one for whom she had a regard.

'Seek not to know such things from Mr Hans,' said Mordecai, gravely, laying his hand on her curls, as he was wont. 'What Daniel Deronda wishes us to know about himself is for him to tell us.'

And Mirah felt herself rebuked, as Deronda had done. But to be rebuked in this way by Mordecai made her rather proud.

'I see no one so great as my brother,' she said to Mrs Meyrick one day that she called at the Chelsea house on her way home, and, according to her hope, found the little mother alone. 'It is difficult to think that he belongs to the same world as those people I used to live amongst. I told you once that they made life seem like a madhouse; but when I am with Ezra he makes me feel that his life is a great good, though he has suffered so much; not like me, who wanted to die because I had suffered a little, and only for a little while. His soul is so full, it is impossible for him to wish for death as I did. I get the same sort of feeling from him that I got yesterday, when I was tired, and came home through the park after the sweet rain had fallen and the sunshine lay on the grass and flowers. Everything in the sky and under the sky looked so pure and beautiful that the weariness and trouble and folly seemed only a small part of what is, and I became more patient and hopeful.'

A dove-like note of melancholy in this speech caused Mrs Meyrick to look at Mirah with new examination. After laying down her hat and pushing her curls flat, with an air of fatigue, she had placed herself on a chair opposite her friend in her habitual attitude, her feet and hands just crossed: and at a distance she might have seemed a coloured statue of serenity. But Mrs Meyrick discerned a new look of suppressed suffering in her face, which corresponded to the hint that to be patient and hopeful required some extra influence.

'Is there any fresh trouble on your mind, my dear?' said Mrs Meyrick, giving up her needlework as a sign of concentrated attention.

Mirah hesitated before she said, 'I am too ready to speak of troubles, I think. It seems unkind to put anything painful into other people's minds, unless one were sure it would hinder something worse. And perhaps I am too hasty and fearful.'

'Oh, my dear, mothers are made to like pain and trouble for the sake of their children. Is it because the singing lessons are so few, and are likely to fall off when the season comes to an end? Success in these things can't come all at once.' Mrs Meyrick did not believe that she was touching the real grief; but a guess that could be corrected would make an easier channel for confidence.

'No, not that,' said Mirah, shaking her head gently. 'I have been a little disappointed because so many ladies said they wanted me to give them or their daughters lessons, and then I never heard of them again. But perhaps after the holidays I shall teach in some schools. Besides, you know, I am as rich as a princess now. I

have not touched the hundred pounds that Mrs Klesmer gave me; and I should never be afraid that Ezra would be in want of anything, because there is Mr Deronda, and he said, “It is the chief honour of my life that your brother will share anything with me.” Oh no! Ezra and I can have no fears for each other about such things as food and clothing.’

‘But there is some other fear on your mind,’ said Mrs Meyrick, not without divination – ‘a fear of something that may disturb your peace? Don’t be forecasting evil, dear child, unless it is what you can guard against. Anxiety is good for nothing if we can’t turn it into a defence. But there’s no defence against all the things that might be. Have you any more reason for being anxious now than you had a month ago?’

‘Yes, I have,’ said Mirah. ‘I have kept it from Ezra. I have not dared to tell him. Pray forgive me that I can’t do without telling you. I *have* more reason for being anxious. It is five days ago now. I am quite sure I saw my father.’

Mrs Meyrick shrank into smaller space, packing her arms across her chest and leaning forward – to hinder herself from pelting that father with her worst epithets.

‘The year has changed him,’ Mirah went on. ‘He had already been much altered and worn in the time before I left him. You remember I said how he used sometimes to cry. He was always excited one way or the other. I have told Ezra everything that I told you, and he says that my father had taken to gambling, which makes people easily distressed, and then again exalted. And now – it was only a moment that I saw him – his face was more haggard, and his clothes were shabby. He was with a much worse-looking man, who carried something, and they were hurrying along after an omnibus.’

‘Well, child, he did not see you, I hope?’

‘No. I had just come from Mrs Raymond’s, and I was waiting to cross near the Marble Arch. Soon he was on the omnibus and gone out of sight. It was a dreadful moment. My old life seemed to have come back again, and it was worse than it had ever been before. And I could not help feeling it a new deliverance that he was gone out of sight without knowing that I was there. And yet it hurt me that I was feeling so – it seemed hateful in me – almost like words I once had to speak in a play, that “I had warmed my hands in the blood of my kindred.” For where might my father be going? What may become of him? And his having a daughter who would own him in spite of all, might have hindered the worst. Is there any pain like seeing what ought to be the best things in life turned into the worst? All those opposite feelings were meeting and pressing against each other, and took up all my strength. No one could act that. Acting is slow and poor to what we go through within. I don’t know how I called a cab. I only remember that I was in it when I began to think, “I cannot tell Ezra; he must not know.” ’

‘You are afraid of grieving him?’ Mrs Meyrick asked, when Mirah had paused a little.

‘Yes – and there is something more,’ said Mirah, hesitatingly, as if she were examining her feeling before she would venture to speak of it. ‘I want to tell you; I could not tell any one else. I could not have told my own mother; I should have closed it up before her. I feel shame for my father, and it is perhaps strange – but the shame is greater before Ezra than before any one else in the world. He desired me to tell him all about my life, and I obeyed him. But it is always like a smart to me to know that those things about my father are in Ezra’s mind. And – can you believe it? – when the thought haunts me how it would be if my father were to come and show himself before us both, what seems as if it would scorch me most is seeing my father shrinking before Ezra. That is the truth. I don’t know whether it is a right feeling. But I can’t help thinking that I would rather try to maintain my father in secret, and bear a great deal in that way, if I could hinder him from meeting my brother.’

‘You must not encourage that feeling, Mirah,’ said Mrs Meyrick, hastily. ‘It would be very dangerous; it would be wrong. You must not have concealments of that sort.’

‘But ought I now to tell Ezra that I have seen my father?’ said Mirah, with deprecation in her tone.

‘No,’ Mrs Meyrick answered, dubitatively. ‘I don’t know that it is necessary to do that. Your father may go away with the birds. It is not clear that he came after you; you may never see him again. And then your brother will have been spared a useless anxiety. But promise me that if your father sees you – gets hold of you in any way again – you will let us all know. Promise me that solemnly, Mirah. I have a right to ask it.’

Mirah reflected a little, then leaned forward to put her hands in Mrs Meyrick’s, and said, ‘Since you ask it, I do promise. I will bear this feeling of shame. I have been so long used to think that I must bear that sort of inward pain. But the shame for my father burns me more when I think of his meeting Ezra.’ She was silent a moment or two, and then said, in a new tone of yearning compassion, ‘And we are his children – and he was once young like us – and my mother loved him. Oh! I cannot help seeing it all close, and it hurts me like a cruelty.’

Mirah shed no tears: the discipline of her whole life had been against indulgence in such manifestation, which soon falls under the control of strong motives; but it seemed that the more intense expression of sorrow had entered into her voice. Mrs Meyrick, with all her quickness and loving insight, did not quite understand

that filial feeling in Mirah which had active roots deep below her indignation for the worst offences. She could conceive that a mother would have a clinging pity and shame for a reprobate son, but she was out of patience with what she held an exaggerated susceptibility on behalf of this father, whose reappearance inclined her to wish him under the care of a turn-key. Mirah's promise, however, was some security against her weakness.

That incident was the only reason that Mirah herself could have stated for the hidden sadness which Hans had divined. Of one element in her changed mood she could have given no definite account: it was something as dim as the sense of approaching weather-change, and had extremely slight external promptings, such as we are often ashamed to find all we can allege in support of the busy constructions that go on within us, not only without effort but even against it, under the influence of any blind emotional stirring. Perhaps the first leaven of uneasiness was laid by Gwendolen's behaviour on that visit which was entirely superfluous as a means of engaging Mirah to sing, and could have no other motive than the excited and strange questioning about Deronda. Mirah had instinctively kept the visit a secret, but the active remembrance of it had raised a new susceptibility in her, and made her alive as she had never been before to the relations Deronda must have with that society which she herself was getting frequent glimpses of without belonging to it. Her peculiar life and education had produced in her an extraordinary mixture of unworldliness, with knowledge of the world's evil, and even this knowledge was a strange blending of direct observation with the effects of reading and theatrical study. Her memory was furnished with abundant passionate situation and intrigue, which she never made emotionally her own, but felt a repelled aloofness from, as she had done from the actual life around her. Some of that imaginative knowledge began now to weave itself around Mrs Grandcourt; and though Mirah would admit no position likely to affect her reverence for Deronda, she could not avoid a new painfully vivid association of his general life with a world away from her own, where there might be some involvement of his feeling and action with a woman like Gwendolen, who was increasingly repugnant to her – increasingly, even after she had ceased to see her; for liking and disliking can grow in meditation as fast as in the more immediate kind of presence. Any disquietude consciously due to the idea that Deronda's deepest care might be for something remote not only from herself but even from his friendship for her brother, she would have checked with rebuking questions: – What was she but one who had shared his generous kindness with many others? and his attachment to her brother, was it not begun late to be soon ended? Other ties had come before, and others would remain after this had been cut by swift-coming death. But her uneasiness had not reached that point of self-recognition in which she would have been ashamed of it as an indirect, presumptuous claim on Deronda's feeling. That she or any one else should think of him as her possible lover was a conception which had never entered her mind; indeed it was equally out of the question with Mrs Meyrick and the girls, who with Mirah herself regarded his intervention in her life as something exceptional, and were so impressed by his mission as her deliverer and guardian that they would have held it an offence to hint at his holding any other relation towards her: a point of view which Hans also had readily adopted. It is a little hard upon some men that they appear to sink for us in becoming lovers. But precisely to this innocence of the Meyricks was owing the disturbance of Mirah's unconsciousness. The first occasion could hardly have been more trivial, but it prepared her emotive nature for a deeper effect from what happened afterwards.

It was when Anna Gascoigne, visiting the Meyricks, was led to speak of her cousinship with Gwendolen. The visit had been arranged that Anna might see Mirah; the three girls were at home with their mother, and there was naturally a flux of talk among six feminine creatures, free from the presence of a distorting male standard. Anna Gascoigne felt herself much at home with the Meyrick girls, who knew what it was to have a brother, and to be generally regarded as of minor importance in the world; and she had told Rex that she thought the University very nice, because brothers made friends there whose families were not rich and grand, and yet (like the University) were very nice. The Meyricks seemed to her almost alarmingly clever, and she consulted them much on the best mode of teaching Lotta, confiding to them that she herself was the least clever of her family. Mirah had lately come in, and there was a complete bouquet of young faces round the tea-table – Hafiz, seated a little aloft with large eyes on the alert, regarding the whole scene as an apparatus for supplying his allowance of milk.

'Think of our surprise, Mirah,' said Kate. 'We were speaking of Mr Deronda and the Mallingers, and it turns out that Miss Gascoigne knows them.'

'I only know about them,' said Anna, a little flushed with excitement, what she had heard and now saw of the lovely Jewess being an almost startling novelty to her. 'I have not even seen them. But some months ago, my cousin married Sir Hugo Mallinger's nephew, Mr Grandcourt, who lived in Sir Hugo's place at Diplow, near us.'

'There!' exclaimed Mab, clasping her hands. 'Something must come of that. Mrs Grandcourt, the Vandyke duchess, is your cousin?'

'Oh yes; I was her bridesmaid,' said Anna. 'Her mamma and mine are sisters. My aunt was much richer before last year, but then she and mamma lost all their fortune. Papa is a clergyman, you know, so it makes

very little difference to us, except that we keep no carriage, and have no dinner-parties – and I like it better. But it was very sad for poor Aunt Davilow, for she could not live with us, because she has four daughters besides Gwendolen; but then, when she married Mr Grandcourt, it did not signify so much, because of his being so rich.'

'Oh, this finding out relationships is delightful!' said Mab. 'It is like a Chinese puzzle that one has to fit together. I feel sure something wonderful may be made of it, but I can't tell what.'

'Dear me, Mab!' said Amy, 'relationships must branch out. The only difference is, that we happen to know some of the people concerned. Such things are going on every day.'

'And pray, Amy, why do you insist on the number nine being so wonderful?' said Mab. 'I am sure that is happening every day. Never mind, Miss Gascoigne; please go on. And Mr Deronda? – have you never seen Mr Deronda? You *must* bring him in.'

'No, I have not seen him,' said Anna; 'but he was at Diplow before my cousin was married, and I have heard my aunt speaking of him to papa. She said what you have been saying about him – only not so much: I mean, about Mr Deronda living with Sir Hugo Mallinger, and being so nice, she thought. We talk a great deal about every one who comes near Pennicote, because it is so seldom there is any one new. But I remember, when I asked Gwendolen what she thought of Mr Deronda, she said, "Don't mention it, Anna; but I think his hair is dark." That was her droll way of answering; she was always so lively. It is really rather wonderful that I should come to hear so much about him, all through Mr Hans knowing Rex, and then my having the pleasure of knowing you,' Anna ended, looking at Mrs Meyrick with a shy grace.

'The pleasure is on our side too; but the wonder would have been, if you had come to this house without hearing of Mr Deronda – wouldn't it, Mirah?' said Mrs Meyrick.

Mirah smiled acquiescently, but had nothing to say. A confused discontent took possession of her at the mingling of names and images to which she had been listening.

'My son calls Mrs Grandcourt the Vandyke duchess,' continued Mrs Meyrick, turning again to Anna; 'he thinks her so striking and picturesque.'

'Yes,' said Anna. 'Gwendolen was always so beautiful – people fell dreadfully in love with her. I thought it a pity, because it made them unhappy.'

'And how do you like Mr Grandcourt, the happy lover?' said Mrs Meyrick, who, in her way, was as much interested as Mab in the hints she had been hearing of vicissitude in the life of a widow with daughters.

'Papa approved of Gwendolen's accepting him, and my aunt says he is very generous,' said Anna, beginning with a virtuous intention of repressing her own sentiments; but then, unable to resist a rare occasion for speaking them freely, she went on – 'else I should have thought he was not very nice – rather proud, and not at all lively, like Gwendolen. I should have thought some one younger and more lively would have suited her better. But, perhaps, having a brother who seems to us better than any one makes us think worse of others.'

'Wait till you see Mr Deronda,' said Mab, nodding significantly. 'Nobody's brother will do after him.'

'Our brothers *must* do for people's husbands,' said Kate, curtly, 'because they will not get Mr Deronda. No woman will do for him to marry.'

'No woman ought to want him to marry her,' said Mab, with indignation. '*I* never should. Fancy finding out that he had a tailor's bill, and used boot-hooks, like Hans. Who ever thought of his marrying?'

'I have,' said Kate. 'When I drew a wedding for a frontispiece to "Hearts and Diamonds," I made a sort of likeness of him for the bridegroom, and I went about looking for a grand woman who would do for his countess, but I saw none that would not be poor creatures by the side of him.'

'You should have seen this Mrs Grandcourt then,' said Mrs Meyrick. 'Hans says that she and Mr Deronda set each other off when they are side by side. She is tall and fair. But you know her, Mirah – you can always say something descriptive. What do *you* think of Mrs Grandcourt?'

'I think she is like the *Princess of Eboli* in *Don Carlos,*' said Mirah, with a quick intensity. She was pursuing an association in her own mind not intelligible to her hearers – an association with a certain actress as well as the part she represented.

'Your comparison is a riddle for me, my dear,' said Mrs Meyrick, smiling.

'You said that Mrs Grandcourt was tall and fair,' continued Mirah, slightly paler. 'That is quite true.'

Mrs Meyrick's quick eye and ear detected something unusual, but immediately explained it to herself. Fine ladies had often wounded Mirah by caprices of manner and intention.

'Mrs Grandcourt had thought of having lessons from Mirah,' she said, turning to Anna. 'But many have talked of having lessons, and then have found no time. Fashionable ladies have too much work to do.'

And the chat went on without further insistance on the *Princess of Eboli.* That comparison escaped Mirah's lips under the urgency of a pang unlike anything she had felt before. The conversation from the beginning had revived unpleasant impressions, and Mrs Meyrick's suggestion of Gwendolen's figure by the side of Deronda's had the stinging effect of a voice outside her, confirming her secret conviction that this tall and fair woman

had some hold on his lot. For a long while afterwards she felt as if she had had a jarring shock through her frame.

In the evening, putting her cheek against her brother's shoulder as she was sitting by him, while he sat propped up in bed under a new difficulty of breathing, she said –

'Ezra, does it ever hurt your love for Mr Deronda that so much of his life was all hidden away from you, – that he is amongst persons and cares about persons who are all so unlike us – I mean, unlike you?'

'No, assuredly no,' said Mordecai. 'Rather, it is a precious thought to me that he has a preparation which I lacked, and is an accomplished Egyptian.' Then, recollecting that his words had a reference which his sister must not yet understand, he added, 'I have the more to give him, since his treasure differs from mine. That is a blessedness in friendship.'

Mirah mused a little.

'Still,' she said, 'it would be a trial to your love for him if that other part of his life were like a crowd in which he had got entangled, so that he was carried away from you – I mean in his thoughts, and not merely carried out of sight as he is now – and not merely for a little while, but continually. How should you bear that? Our religion commands us to bear. But how should you bear it?'

'Not well, my sister – not well; but it will never happen,' said Mordecai, looking at her with a tender smile. He thought that her heart needed comfort on his account.

Mirah said no more. She mused over the difference between her own state of mind and her brother's, and felt her comparative pettiness. Why could she not be completely satisfied with what satisfied his larger judgment? She gave herself no fuller reason than a painful sense of unfitness – in what? Airy possibilities to which she could give no outline, but to which one name and one figure gave the wandering persistency of a blot in her vision. Here lay the vaguer source of the hidden sadness rendered noticeable to Hans by some diminution of that sweet ease, that ready joyousness of response in her speech and smile, which had come with the new sense of freedom and safety, and had made her presence like the freshly-opened daisies and clear bird-notes after the rain. She herself regarded her uneasiness as a sort of ingratitude and dulness of sensibility towards the great things that had been given her in her new life; and whenever she threw more energy than usual into her singing, it was the energy of indignation against the shallowness of her own content. In that mood she once said, 'Shall I tell you what is the difference between you and me, Ezra? You are a spring in the drought, and I am an acorn-cup; the waters of heaven fill me, but the least little shake leaves me empty.'

'Why, what has shaken thee?' said Mordecai. He fell into this antique form of speech habitually in talking to his sister and to the Cohen children.

'Thoughts,' said Mirah; 'thoughts that come like the breeze and shake me – bad people, wrong things, misery – and how they might touch our life.'

'We must take our portion, Mirah. It is there. On whose shoulder would we lay it, that we might be free?'

The one voluntary sign that she made of her inward care was this distant allusion.

Chapter Fifty-Three

> My desolation does begin to make
> A better life.
>
> — SHAKESPEARE: *Antony and Cleopatra*

Before Deronda was summoned to a second interview with his mother, a day had passed in which she had only sent him a message to say that she was not yet well enough to receive him again; but on the third morning he had a note saying, 'I leave to-day. Come and see me at once.'

He was shown into the same room as before; but it was much darkened with blinds and curtains. The Princess was not there, but she presently entered, dressed in a loose wrap of some soft silk, in colour a dusky orange, her head again with black lace floating about it, her arms showing themselves bare from under her wide sleeves. Her face seemed even more impressive in the sombre light, the eyes larger, the lines more vigorous. You might have imagined her a sorceress who would stretch forth her wonderful hand and arm to mix youth-potions for others, but scorned to mix them for herself, having had enough of youth.

She put her arms on her son's shoulders at once, and kissed him on both cheeks, then seated herself among her cushions with an air of assured firmness and dignity unlike her fitfulness in their first interview, and told Deronda to sit down by her. He obeyed, saying, 'You are quite relieved now, I trust?'

'Yes, I am at ease again. Is there anything more that you would like to ask me?' she said, with the manner of a queen rather than of a mother.

'Can I find the house in Genoa where you used to live with my grandfather?' said Deronda.

'No,' she answered, with a deprecating movement of her arm, 'it is pulled down – not to be found. But about our family, and where my father lived at various times – you will find all that among the papers in the chest, better than I can tell you. My father, I told you, was a physician. My mother was a Morteira. I used to hear all those things without listening. You will find them all. I was born amongst them without my will. I banished them as soon as I could.'

Deronda tried to hide his pained feeling, and said, 'Anything else that I should desire to know from you could only be what it is some satisfaction to your own feeling to tell me.'

'I think I have told you everything that could be demanded of me,' said the Princess, looking coldly meditative. It seemed as if she had exhausted her emotion in their former interview. The fact was, she had said to herself, 'I have done it all. I have confessed all. I will not go through it again. I will save myself from agitation.' And she was acting out that theme.

But to Deronda's nature the moment was cruel: it made the filial yearning of his life a disappointed pilgrimage to a shrine where there were no longer the symbols of sacredness. It seemed that all the woman lacking in her was present in him as he said, with some tremor in his voice –

'Then are we to part, and I never be anything to you?'

'It is better so,' said the Princess, in a softer, mellower voice. 'There could be nothing but hard duty for you, even if it were possible for you to take the place of my son. You would not love me. Don't deny it,' she said, abruptly, putting up her hand. 'I know what is the truth. You don't like what I did. You are angry with me. You think I robbed you of something. You are on your grandfather's side, and you will always have a condemnation of me in your heart.'

Deronda felt himself under a ban of silence. He rose from his seat by her, preferring to stand, if he had to obey that imperious prohibition of any tenderness. But his mother now looked up at him with a new admiration in her glance, saying –

'You are wrong to be angry with me. You are the better for what I did.' After pausing a little, she added, abruptly, 'And now tell me what you shall do.'

'Do you mean now, immediately,' said Deronda; 'or as to the course of my future life?'

'I mean in the future. What difference will it make to you that I have told you about your birth?'

'A very great difference,' said Deronda, emphatically. 'I can hardly think of anything that would make a greater difference.'

'What shall you do, then?' said the Princess, with more sharpness. 'Make yourself just like your grandfather

– be what he wished you – turn yourself into a Jew like him?'

'That is impossible. The effect of my education can never be done away with. The Christian sympathies in which my mind was reared can never die out of me,' said Deronda, with increasing tenacity of tone. 'But I consider it my duty – it is the impulse of my feeling – to identify myself, as far as possible, with my hereditary people, and if I can see any work to be done for them that I can give my soul and hand to I shall choose to do it.'

His mother had her eyes fixed on him with a wondering speculation, examining his face as if she thought that by close attention she could read a difficult language there. He bore her gaze very firmly, sustained by a resolute opposition, which was the expression of his fullest self. She bent towards him a little, and said, with a decisive emphasis –

'You are in love with a Jewess.'

Deronda coloured and said, 'My reasons would be independent of any such fact.'

'I know better. I have seen what men are,' said the Princess; peremptorily. 'Tell me the truth. She is a Jewess who will not accept anyone but a Jew. There *are* a few such,' she added, with a touch of scorn.

Deronda had that objection to answer which we all have known in speaking to those who are too certain of their own fixed interpretations to be enlightened by anything we may say. But besides this, the point immediately in question was one on which he felt a repugnance either to deny or affirm. He remained silent, and she presently said –

'You love her as your father loved me, and she draws you after her as I drew him.'

Those words touched Deronda's filial imagination, and some tenderness in his glance was taken by his mother as an assent. She went on with rising passion. 'But I was leading him the other way. And now your grandfather is getting his revenge.'

'Mother,' said Deronda, remonstrantly, 'don't let us think of it in that way. I will admit that there may come some benefit from the education you chose for me. I prefer cherishing the benefit with gratitude, to dwelling with resentment on the injury. I think it would have been right that I should have been brought up with the consciousness that I was a Jew, but it must always have been a good to me to have as wide an instruction and sympathy as possible. And now, you have restored me my inheritance – events have brought a fuller restitution than you could have made – you have been saved from robbing my people of my service and me of my duty: can you not bring your whole soul to consent to this?'

Deronda paused in his pleading: his mother looked at him listeningly, as if the cadence of his voice were taking her ear, yet she shook her head slowly. He began again even more urgently.

'You have told me that you sought what you held the best for me: open your heart to relenting and love towards my grandfather, who sought what he held the best for you.'

'Not for me, no,' she said, shaking her head with more absolute denial, and folding her arms tightly. 'I tell you, he never thought of his daughter except as an instrument. Because I had wants outside his purpose, I was to be put in a frame and tortured. If that is the right law for the world, I will not say that I love it. If my acts were wrong – if it is God who is exacting from me that I should deliver up what I withheld – who is punishing me because I deceived my father and did not warn him that I should contradict his trust – well, I have told everything. I have done what I could. And *your* soul consents. That is enough. I have after all been the instrument my father wanted. – "I desire a grandson who shall have a true Jewish heart. Every Jew should rear his family as if he hoped that a Deliverer might spring from it." '

In uttering these last sentences the Princess narrowed her eyes, waved her head up and down, and spoke slowly with a new kind of chest-voice, as if she were quoting unwillingly.

'Were those my grandfather's words?' said Deronda.

'Yes, yes; and you will find them written. I wanted to thwart him,' said the Princess, with a sudden outburst of the passion she had shown in the former interview. Then she added more slowly, 'You would have me love what I have hated from the time I was so high' – here she held her left hand a yard from the floor. – 'That can never be. But what does it matter? His yoke has been on me, whether I loved it or not. You are the grandson he wanted. You speak as men do – as if you felt yourself wise. What does it all mean?'

Her tone was abrupt and scornful. Deronda, in his pained feeling, and under the solemn urgency of the moment, had to keep a clutching remembrance of their relationship, lest his words should become cruel. He began in a deep entreating tone.

'Mother, don't say that I feel myself wise. We are set in the midst of difficulties. I see no other way to get any clearness than by being truthful – not by keeping back facts which may – which should carry obligation within them – which should make the only guidance towards duty. No wonder if such facts come to reveal themselves in spite of concealments. The effects prepared by generations are likely to triumph over a contrivance which would bend them all to the satisfaction of self. Your will was strong, but my grandfather's trust which you accepted and did not fulfil – what you call his yoke – is the expression of something stronger,

with deeper, farther-spreading roots, knit into the foundations of sacredness for all men. You renounced me – you still banish me – as a son' – there was an involuntary movement of indignation in Deronda's voice – 'But that stronger Something has determined that I shall be all the more the grandson whom also you willed to annihilate.'

His mother was watching him fixedly, and again her face gathered admiration. After a moment's silence she said, in a low persuasive tone –

'Sit down again,' and he obeyed, placing himself beside her. She laid her hand on his shoulder and went on.

'You rebuke me. Well – I am the loser. And you are angry because I banish you. What could you do for me but weary your own patience? Your mother is a shattered woman. My sense of life is little more than a sense of what was – except when the pain is present. You reproach me that I parted with you. I had joy enough without you then. Now you are come back to me, and I cannot make you a joy. Have you the cursing spirit of the Jew in you? Are you not able to forgive me? Shall you be glad to think that I am punished because I was not a Jewish mother to you?'

'How can you ask me that?' said Deronda, remonstrantly. 'Have I not besought you that I might now at least be a son to you? My grief is that you have declared me helpless to comfort you. I would give up much that is dear for the sake of soothing your anguish.'

'You shall give up nothing,' said his mother, with the hurry of agitation. 'You shall be happy. You shall let me think of you as happy. I shall have done you no harm. You have no reason to curse me. You shall feel for me as they feel for the dead whom they say prayers for – you shall long that I may be freed from all suffering – from all punishment. And I shall see you instead of always seeing your grandfather. Will any harm come to me because I broke his trust in the daylight after he was gone into darkness? I cannot tell: – if you think *Kaddish* will help me – say it, say it. You will come between me and the dead. When I am in your mind, you will look as you do now – always as if you were a tender son, – always – as if I had been a tender mother.'

She seemed resolved that her agitation should not conquer her, but he felt her hand trembling on his shoulder. Deep, deep compassion hemmed in all words. With a face of beseeching he put his arm round her and pressed her head tenderly under his. They sat so for some moments. Then she lifted her head again and rose from her seat with a great sigh, as if in that breath she were dismissing a weight of thoughts. Deronda, standing in front of her, felt that the parting was near. But one of her swift alternations had come upon his mother.

'Is she beautiful?' she said, abruptly.

'Who?' said Deronda, changing colour.

'The woman you love.'

It was not a moment for deliberate explanation. He was obliged to say, 'Yes.'

'Not ambitious?'

'No, I think not.'

'Not one who must have a path of her own?'

'I think her nature is not given to make great claims.'

'She is not like that?' said the Princess, taking from her wallet a miniature with jewels round it, and holding it before her son. It was her own in all the fire of youth, and as Deronda looked at it with admiring sadness, she said, 'Had I not a rightful claim to be something more than a mere daughter and mother? The voice and the genius matched the face. Whatever else was wrong, acknowledge that I had a right to be an artist, though my father's will was against it. My nature gave me a charter.'

'I do acknowledge that,' said Deronda, looking from the miniature to her face, which even in its worn pallor had an expression of living force beyond anything that the pencil could show.

'Will you take the portrait?' said the Princess, more gently. 'If she is a kind woman teach her to think of me kindly.'

'I shall be grateful for the portrait,' said Deronda, 'but – I ought to say, I have no assurance that she whom I love will have any love for me. I have kept silence.'

'Who and what is she?' said the mother. The question seemed a command.

'She was brought up as a singer for the stage,' said Deronda, with inward reluctance. 'Her father took her away early from her mother, and her life has been unhappy. She is very young – only twenty. Her father wished to bring her up in disregard – even in dislike of her Jewish origin, but she has clung with all her affection to the memory of her mother and the fellowship of her people.'

'Ah! like you. She is attached to the Judaism she knows nothing of,' said the Princess, peremptorily. 'That is poetry – fit to last through an opera night. Is she fond of her artist's life – is her singing worth anything?'

'Her singing is exquisite. But her voice is not suited to the stage. I think that the artist's life has been made repugnant to her.'

'Why, she is made for you, then. Sir Hugo said you were bitterly against being a singer, and I can see that

you would never have let yourself be merged in a wife, as your father was.'

'I repeat,' said Deronda, emphatically – 'I repeat that I have no assurance of her love for me, of the possibility that we can ever be united. Other things – painful issues may lie before me. I have always felt that I should prepare myself to renounce, not cherish that prospect. But I suppose I might feel so of happiness in general. Whether it may come or not, one should try and prepare one's self to do without it.'

'Do you feel in that way?' said his mother, laying her hands on his shoulders, and perusing his face, while she spoke in a low meditative tone, pausing between her sentences. 'Poor boy! … I wonder how it would have been if I had kept you with me … whether you would have turned your heart to the old things … against mine … and we should have quarrelled … your grandfather would have been in you … and you would have hampered my life with your young growth from the old root.'

'I think my affection might have lasted through all our quarrelling,' said Deronda, saddened more and more, 'and that would not have hampered – surely it would have enriched your life.'

'Not then, not then … I did not want it then … I might have been glad of it now,' said the mother, with a bitter melancholy, 'if I could have been glad of anything.'

'But you love your other children, and they love you?' said Deronda, anxiously.

'Oh yes,' she answered, as to a question about a matter of course, while she folded her arms again. 'But,' … she added in a deeper tone, … 'I am not a loving woman. That is the truth. It is a talent to love – I lacked it. Others have loved me – and I have acted their love. I know very well what love makes of men and women – it is subjection. It takes another for a larger self, enclosing this one,' – she pointed to her own bosom. 'I was never willingly subject to any man. Men have been subject to me.'

'Perhaps the man who was subject was the happier of the two,' said Deronda – not with a smile, but with a grave, sad sense of his mother's privation.

'Perhaps – but I *was* happy – for a few years I was happy. If I had not been afraid of defeat and failure, I might have gone on. I miscalculated. What then? It is all over. Another life! Men talk of "another life," as if it only began on the other side of the grave. I have long entered on another life.' With the last words she raised her arms till they were bare to the elbow, her brow was contracted in one deep fold, her eyes were closed, her voice was smothered: in her dusky flame-coloured garment, she looked like a dreamed visitant from some region of departed mortals.

Deronda's feeling was wrought to a pitch of acuteness in which he was no longer quite master of himself. He gave an audible sob. His mother, opening her eyes, and letting her hands again rest on his shoulders, said –

'Good-bye, my son, good-bye. We shall hear no more of each other. Kiss me.'

He clasped his arms round her neck, and they kissed each other.

Deronda did not know how he got out of the room. He felt an older man. All his boyish yearnings and anxieties about his mother had vanished. He had gone through a tragic experience which must for ever solemnise his life and deepen the significance of the acts by which he bound himself to others.

Chapter Fifty-Four

The unwilling brain
Feigns often what it would not; and we trust
Imagination with such phantasies
As the tongue dares not fashion into words;
Which have no words, their horror makes them dim
To the mind's eye.

– SHELLEY

Madonna Pia, whose husband, feeling himself injured by her, took her to his castle amid the swampy flats of the Maremma and got rid of her there, makes a pathetic figure in Dante's Purgatory, among the sinners who repented at the last and desire to be remembered compassionately by their fellow-countrymen. We know little about the grounds of mutual discontent between the Siennese couple, but we may infer with some confidence that the husband had never been a very delightful companion, and that on the flats of the Maremma his disagreeable manners had a background which threw them out remarkably; whence in his desire to punish his wife to the uttermost, the nature of things was so far against him that in relieving himself of her he could not avoid making the relief mutual. And thus, without any hardness to the poor Tuscan lady who had her deliverance long ago, one may feel warranted in thinking of her with a less sympathetic interest than of the better known Gwendolen who, instead of being delivered from her errors on earth and cleansed from their effect in purgatory, is at the very height of her entanglement in those fatal meshes which are woven within more closely than without, and often make the inward torture disproportionate to what is discernible as outward cause.

In taking his wife with him on a yachting expedition, Grandcourt had no intention to get rid of her; on the contrary, he wanted to feel more securely that she was his to do as he liked with, and to make her feel it also. Moreover, he was himself very fond of yachting: its dreamy do-nothing absolutism, unmolested by social demands, suited his disposition, and he did not in the least regard it as an equivalent for the dreariness of the Maremma. He had his reasons for carrying Gwendolen out of reach, but they were not reasons that can seem black in the mere statement. He suspected a growing spirit of opposition in her, and his feeling about the sentimental inclination she betrayed for Deronda was what in another man he would have called jealousy. In himself it seemed merely a resolution to put an end to such foolery as must have been going on in that prearranged visit of Deronda's which he had divined and interrupted.

And Grandcourt might have pleaded that he was perfectly justified in taking care that his wife should fulfil the obligations she had accepted. Her marriage was a contract where all the ostensible advantages were on her side, and it was only one of those advantages that her husband should use his power to hinder her from any injurious self-committal or unsuitable behaviour. He knew quite well that she had not married him – had not overcome her repugnance to certain facts – out of love to him personally; he had won her by the rank and luxuries he had to give her, and these she had got: he had fulfilled his side of the contract.

And Gwendolen, we know, was thoroughly aware of the situation. She could not excuse herself by saying that there had been a tacit part of the contract on her side – namely, that she meant to rule and have her own way. With all her early indulgence in the disposition to dominate, she was not one of the narrow-brained women who through life regard all their own selfish demands as rights, and every claim upon themselves as an injury. She had a root of conscience in her, and the process of purgatory had begun for her on the green earth: she knew that she had been wrong.

But now enter into the soul of this young creature as she found herself, with the blue Mediterranean dividing her from the world, on the tiny plank-island of a yacht, the domain of the husband to whom she felt that she had sold herself, and had been paid the strict price – nay, paid more than she had dared to ask in the handsome maintenance of her mother: – the husband to whom she had sold her truthfulness and sense of justice, so that he held them throttled into silence, collared and dragged behind him to witness what he would, without remonstrance.

What had she to complain of? The yacht was of the prettiest; the cabin fitted up to perfection, smelling of cedar, soft-cushioned, hung with silk, expanded with mirrors; the crew such as suited an elegant toy, one of

them having even ringlets, as well as a bronze complexion and fine teeth; and Mr Lush was not there, for he had taken his way back to England as soon as he had seen all and everything on board. Moreover, Gwendolen herself liked the sea: it did not make her ill; and to observe the rigging of the vessel and forecast the necessary adjustments was a sort of amusement that might have gratified her activity and enjoyment of imaginary rule; the weather was fine, and they were coasting southward, where even the rain-furrowed, heat-cracked clay becomes gem-like with purple shadows, and where one may float between blue and blue in an open-eyed dream that the world has done with sorrow.

But what can still that hunger of the heart which sickens the eye for beauty, and makes sweet-scented ease an oppression? What sort of Moslem paradise would quiet the terrible fury of moral repulsion and cowed resistance which, like an eating pain intensifying into torture, concentrates the mind in that poisonous misery? While Gwendolen, throned on her cushions at evening, and beholding the glory of sea and sky softening as if with boundless love around her, was hoping that Grandcourt in his march up and down was not going to pause near her, not going to look at her or speak to her, some woman under a smoky sky, obliged to consider the price of eggs in arranging her dinner, was listening for the music of a footstep that would remove all risk from her foretaste of joy; some couple, bending, cheek by cheek, over a bit of work done by the one and delighted in by the other, were reckoning the earnings that would make them rich enough for a holiday among the furze and heather.

Had Grandcourt the least conception of what was going on in the breast of this wife? He conceived that she did not love him: but was that necessary? She was under his power, and he was not accustomed to soothe himself, as some cheerfully-disposed persons are, with the conviction that he was very generally and justly beloved. But what lay quite away from his conception was, that she could have any special repulsion for him personally. How could she? He himself knew what personal repulsion was – nobody better: his mind was much furnished with a sense of what brutes his fellow-creatures were, both masculine and feminine; what odious familiarities they had, what smirks, what modes of flourishing their handkerchiefs, what costume, what lavender water, what bulging eyes, and what foolish notions of making themselves agreeable by remarks which were not wanted. In this critical view of mankind there was an affinity between him and Gwendolen before their marriage, and we know that she had been attractingly wrought upon by the refined negations he presented to her. Hence he understood her repulsion for Lush. But how was he to understand or conceive her present repulsion for Henleigh Grandcourt? Some men bring themselves to believe, and not merely maintain, the non-existence of an external world; a few others believe themselves objects of repulsion to a woman without being told so in plain language. But Grandcourt did not belong to this eccentric body of thinkers. He had all his life had reason to take a flattering view of his own attractiveness, and to place himself in fine antithesis to the men who, he saw at once, must be revolting to a woman of taste. He had no idea of a moral repulsion, and could not have believed, if he had been told it, that there may be a resentment and disgust which will gradually make beauty more detestable than ugliness, through exasperation at that outward virtue in which hateful things can flaunt themselves or find a supercilious advantage.

How, then, could Grandcourt divine what was going on in Gwendolen's breast?

For their behaviour to each other scandalised no observer – not even the foreign maid warranted against sea-sickness; nor Grandcourt's own experienced valet; still less the picturesque crew, who regarded them as a model couple in high life. Their companionship consisted chiefly in a well-bred silence. Grandcourt had no humorous observations at which Gwendolen could refuse to smile, no chitchat to make small occasions of dispute. He was perfectly polite in arranging an additional garment over her when needful, and in handing her any object that he perceived her to need, and she could not fall into the vulgarity of accepting or rejecting such politeness rudely.

Grandcourt put up his telescope and said, 'There's a plantation of sugar-canes at the foot of that rock: should you like to look?'

Gwendolen said, 'Yes, please,' remembering that she must try and interest herself in sugar-canes as something outside her personal affairs. Then Grandcourt would walk up and down and smoke for a long while, pausing occasionally to point out a sail on the horizon, and at last would seat himself and look at Gwendolen with his narrow, immovable gaze, as if she were part of the complete yacht; while she, conscious of being looked at, was exerting her ingenuity not to meet his eyes. At dinner he would remark that the fruit was getting stale, and they must put in somewhere for more; or, observing that she did not drink the wine, he asked her if she would like any other kind better. A lady was obliged to respond to these things suitably; and even if she had not shrunk from quarrelling on other grounds, quarrelling with Grandcourt was impossible: she might as well have made angry remarks to a dangerous serpent ornamentally coiled in her cabin without invitation. And what sort of dispute could a woman of any pride and dignity begin on a yacht?

Grandcourt had an intense satisfaction in leading his wife captive after this fashion: it gave their life on a small scale a royal representation and publicity in which everything familiar was got rid of, and everybody

must do what was expected of them whatever might be their private protest – the protest (kept strictly private) adding to the piquancy of despotism.

To Gwendolen, who even in the freedom of her maiden time had had very faint glimpses of any heroism or sublimity, the medium that now thrust itself everywhere before her view was this husband and her relation to him. The beings closest to us, whether in love or hate, are often virtually our interpreters of the world, and some feather-headed gentleman or lady whom in passing we regret to take as legal tender for a human being may be acting as a melancholy theory of life in the minds of those who live with them – like a piece of yellow and wavy glass that distorts form and makes colour an affliction. Their trivial sentences, their petty standards, their low suspicions, their loveless *ennui,* may be making somebody else's life no better than a promenade through a pantheon of ugly idols. Gwendolen had that kind of window before her, affecting the distant equally with the near. Some unhappy wives are soothed by the possibility that they may become mothers; but Gwendolen felt that to desire a child for herself would have been a consenting to the completion of the injury she had been guilty of. She was reduced to dread lest she should become a mother. It was not the image of a new sweetly-budding life that came as a vision of deliverance from the monotony of distaste: it was an image of another sort. In the irritable, fluctuating stages of despair, gleams of hope came in the form of some possible accident. To dwell on the benignity of accident was a refuge from worse temptation.

The embitterment of hatred is often as unaccountable to onlookers as the growth of devoted love, and it not only seems but is really out of direct relation with any outward causes to be alleged. Passion is of the nature of seed, and finds nourishment within, tending to a predominance which determines all currents towards itself, and makes the whole life its tributary. And the intensest form of hatred is that rooted in fear, which compels to silence and drives vehemence into a constructive vindictiveness, an imaginary annihilation of the detested object, something like the hidden rites of vengeance with which the persecuted have made a dark vent for their rage, and soothed their suffering into dumbness. Such hidden rites went on in the secrecy of Gwendolen's mind, but not with soothing effect – rather with the effect of a struggling terror. Side by side with the dread of her husband had grown the self-dread which urged her to flee from the pursuing images wrought by her pent-up impulse. The vision of her past wrong-doing, and what it had brought on her, came with a pale ghastly illumination over every imagined deed that was a rash effort at freedom, such as she had made in her marriage. Moreover, she had learned to see all her acts through the impression they would make on Deronda: whatever relief might come to her, she could not sever it from the judgment of her that would be created in his mind. Not one word of flattery, of indulgence, of dependence on her favour, could be fastened on by her in all their intercourse, to weaken his restraining power over her (in this way Deronda's effort over himself was repaid); and amid the dreary uncertainties of her spoiled life the possible remedies that lay in his mind, nay, the remedy that lay in her feeling for him, made her only hope. He seemed to her a terrible-browed angel from whom she could not think of concealing any deed so as to win an ignorant regard from him: it belonged to the nature of their relation that she should be truthful, for his power over her had begun in the raising of a self-discontent which could be satisfied only by genuine change. But in no concealment had she now any confidence: her vision of what she had to dread took more decidedly than ever the form of some fiercely impulsive deed, committed as in a dream that she would instantaneously wake from to find the effects real though the images had been false: to find death under her hands, but instead of darkness, daylight; instead of satisfied hatred, the dismay of guilt; instead of freedom, the palsy of a new terror – a white dead face from which she was for ever trying to flee and for ever held back. She remembered Deronda's words: they were continually recurring in her thought –

'Turn your fear into a safeguard. Keep your dread fixed on the idea of increasing your remorse. … Take your fear as a safeguard. It is like quickness of hearing. It may make consequences passionately present to you.'

And so it was. In Gwendolen's consciousness Temptation and Dread met and stared like two pale phantoms, each seeing itself in the other – each obstructed by its own image; and all the while her fuller self beheld the apparitions and sobbed for deliverance from them.

Inarticulate prayers, no more definite than a cry, often swept out from her into the vast silence, unbroken except by her husband's breathing or the plash of the wave or the creaking of the masts; but if ever she thought of definite help, it took the form of Deronda's presence and words, of the sympathy he might have for her, of the direction he might give her. It was sometimes after a white-lipped, fierce-eyed temptation with murdering fingers had made its demon-visit that these best moments of inward crying and clinging for rescue would come to her, and she would lie with wide-open eyes in which the rising tears seemed a blessing, and the thought, 'I will not mind if I can keep from getting wicked,' seemed an answer to the indefinite prayer.

So the days passed, taking them with light breezes beyond and about the Balearic Isles, and then to Sardinia, and then with gentle change persuading them northward again towards Corsica. But this floating, gently-wafted existence, with its apparently peaceful influences, was becoming as bad as a nightmare to

Gwendolen.

'How long are we to be yachting?' she ventured to ask one day after they had been touching at Ajaccio, and the mere fact of change in going ashore had given her a relief from some of the thoughts which seemed now to cling about the very rigging of the vessel, mix with the air in the red silk cabin below, and make the smell of the sea odious.

'What else should we do?' said Grandcourt. 'I'm not tired of it. I don't see why we shouldn't stay out any length of time. There's less to bore one in this way. And where would you go to? I'm sick of foreign places. And we shall have enough of Ryelands. Would you rather be at Ryelands?'

'Oh no,' said Gwendolen, indifferently, finding all places alike undesirable as soon as she imagined herself and her husband in them. 'I only wondered how long you would like this.'

'I like yachting longer than I like anything else,' said Grandcourt; 'and I had none last year. I suppose you are beginning to tire of it. Women are so confoundedly whimsical. They expect everything to give way to them.'

'Oh dear, no!' said Gwendolen, letting out her scorn in a flute-like tone. 'I never expect you to give way.'

'Why should I?' said Grandcourt, with his inward voice, looking at her, and then choosing an orange – for they were at table.

She made up her mind to a length of yachting that she could not see beyond; but the next day, after a squall which had made her rather ill for the first time, he came down to her and said –

'There's been the devil's own work in the night. The skipper says we shall have to stay at Genoa for a week while things are set right.'

'Do you mind that?' said Gwendolen, who lay looking very white amidst her white drapery.

'I should think so. Who wants to be broiling at Genoa?'

'It will be a change,' said Gwendolen, made a little incautious by her languor.

'*I* don't want any change. Besides, the place is intolerable; and one can't move along the roads. I shall go out in a boat, as I used to do, and manage it myself. One can get rid of a few hours every day in that way, instead of stiving in a damnable hotel.'

Here was a prospect which held hope in it. Gwendolen thought of hours when she would be alone, since Grandcourt would not want to take her in the said boat, and in her exultation at this unlooked-for relief, she had wild, contradictory fancies of what she might do with her freedom – that 'running away' which she had already innumerable times seen to be a worse evil than any actual endurance, now finding new arguments as an escape from her worse self. Also, visionary relief on a par with the fancy of a prisoner that the night wind may blow down the wall of his prison and save him from desperate devices, insinuated itself as a better alternative, lawful to wish for.

The fresh current of expectation revived her energies, and enabled her to take all things with an air of cheerfulness and alacrity that made a change marked enough to be noticed by her husband. She watched through the evening lights to the sinking of the moon with less of awed loneliness than was habitual to her – nay, with a vague impression that in this mighty frame of things there might be some preparation of rescue for her. Why not? – since the weather had just been on her side. This possibility of hoping, after her long fluctuation amid fears, was like a first return of hunger to the long-languishing patient.

She was waked the next morning by the casting of the anchor in the port of Genoa – waked from a strangely-mixed dream in which she felt herself escaping over the Mont Cenis, and wondering to find it warmer even in the moonlight on the snow, till suddenly she met Deronda, who told her to go back.

In an hour or so from that dream she actually met Deronda. But it was on the palatial staircase of the *Italia,* where she was feeling warm in her light woollen dress and straw hat; and her husband was by her side.

There was a start of surprise in Deronda before he could raise his hat and pass on. The moment did not seem to favour any closer greeting, and the circumstances under which they had last parted made him doubtful whether Grandcourt would be civilly inclined to him.

The doubt might certainly have been changed into a disagreeable certainty, for Grandcourt on this unaccountable appearance of Deronda at Genoa of all places, immediately tried to conceive how there could have been an arrangement between him and Gwendolen. It is true that before they were well in their rooms, he had seen how difficult it was to shape such an arrangement with any probability, being too cool-headed to find it at once easily credible that Gwendolen had not only while in London hastened to inform Deronda of the yachting project, but had posted a letter to him from Marseilles or Barcelona, advising him to travel to Genoa in time for the chance of meeting her there, or of receiving a letter from her telling of some other destination – all which must have implied a miraculous foreknowledge in her, and in Deronda a bird-like facility in flying about and perching idly. Still he was there, and though Grandcourt would not make a fool of himself by fabrications that others might call preposterous, he was not, for all that, disposed to admit fully that Deronda's presence was so far as Gwendolen was concerned a mere accident. It was a disgusting fact; that

was enough; and no doubt she was well pleased. A man out of temper does not wait for proofs before feeling towards all things animate and inanimate as if they were in a conspiracy against him, but at once thrashes his horse or kicks his dog in consequence. Grandcourt felt towards Gwendolen and Deronda as if he knew them to be in a conspiracy against him, and here was an event in league with them. What he took for clearly certain – and so far he divined the truth – was that Gwendolen was now counting on an interview with Deronda whenever her husband's back was turned.

As he sat taking his coffee at a convenient angle for observing her, he discerned something which he felt sure was the effect of a secret delight – some fresh ease in moving and speaking, some peculiar meaning in her eyes, whatever she looked on. Certainly her troubles had not marred her beauty. Mrs Grandcourt was handsomer than Gwendolen Harleth: her grace and expression were informed by a greater variety of inward experience, giving new play to her features, new attitudes in movement and repose; her whole person and air had the nameless something which often makes a woman more interesting after marriage than before, less confident that all things are according to her opinion, and yet with less of deer-like shyness – more fully a human being.

This morning the benefits of the voyage seemed to be suddenly revealing themselves in a new elasticity of mien. As she rose from the table and put her two heavily-jewelled hands on each side of her neck, according to her wont, she had no art to conceal that sort of joyous expectation which makes the present more bearable than usual, just as when a man means to go out he finds it easier to be amiable to the family for a quarter of an hour beforehand. It is not impossible that a terrier whose pleasure was concerned would perceive those amiable signs and know their meaning – know why his master stood in a peculiar way, talked with alacrity, and even had a peculiar gleam in his eye, so that on the least movement towards the door, the terrier would scuttle to be in time. And, in dog fashion, Grandcourt discerned the signs of Gwendolen's expectation, interpreting them with the narrow correctness which leaves a world of unknown feeling behind.

'A – just ring, please, and tell Gibbs to order some dinner for us at three,' said Grandcourt, as he too rose, took out a cigar, and then stretched his hand towards the hat that lay near. 'I'm going to send Angus to find me a little sailing-boat for us to go out in; one that I can manage, with you at the tiller. It's uncommonly pleasant these fine evenings – the least boring of anything we can do.'

Gwendolen turned cold: there was not only the cruel disappointment – there was the immediate conviction that her husband had determined to take her because he would not leave her out of his sight; and probably this dual solitude in a boat was the more attractive to him because it would be wearisome to her. They were not on the plank-island; she felt it the more possible to begin a contest. But the gleaming content had died out of her. There was a change in her like that of a glacier after sunset.

'I would rather not go in the boat,' she said. 'Take some one else with you.'

'Very well; if you don't go, I shall not go,' said Grandcourt. 'We shall stay suffocating here, that's all.'

'I can't bear going in a boat,' said Gwendolen, angrily.

'That is a sudden change,' said Grandcourt, with a slight sneer. 'But since you decline, we shall stay indoors.'

He laid down his hat again, lit his cigar, and walked up and down the room, pausing now and then to look out of the windows. Gwendolen's temper told her to persist. She knew very well now that Grandcourt would not go without her; but if he must tyrannise over her, he should not do it precisely in the way he would choose. She would oblige him to stay in the hotel. Without speaking again she passed into the adjoining bedroom, and threw herself into a chair with her anger, seeing no purpose or issue – only feeling that the wave of evil had rushed back upon her, and dragged her away from her momentary breathing-place.

Presently Grandcourt came in with his hat on, but threw it off and sat down sideways on a chair nearly in front of her, saying, in his superficial drawl –

'Have you come round yet? or do you find it agreeable to be out of temper? You make things uncommonly pleasant for me.'

'Why do you want to make them unpleasant for *me*?' said Gwendolen, getting helpless again, and feeling the hot tears rise.

'Now, will you be good enough to say what it is you have to complain of?' said Grandcourt, looking into her eyes, and using his most inward voice. 'Is it that I stay indoors when you stay?'

She could give no answer. The sort of truth that made any excuse for her anger could not be uttered. In the conflict of despair and humiliation she began to sob, and the tears rolled down her cheeks – a form of agitation which she had never shown before in her husband's presence.

'I hope this is useful,' said Grandcourt, after a moment or two. 'All I can say is, it's most confoundedly unpleasant. What the devil women can see in this kind of thing, I don't know. *You* see something to be got by it, of course. All I can see is, that we shall be shut up here when we might have been having a pleasant sail.'

'Let us go, then,' said Gwendolen, impetuously. 'Perhaps we shall be drowned.' She began to sob again.

This extraordinary behaviour, which had evidently some relation to Deronda, gave more definiteness to Grandcourt's conclusions. He drew his chair quite close in front of her, and said, in a low tone, 'Just be quiet and listen, will you?'

There seemed to be a magical effect in this close vicinity. Gwendolen shrank and ceased to sob. She kept her eyelids down, and clasped her hands tightly.

'Let us understand each other,' said Grandcourt, in the same tone. 'I know very well what this nonsense means. But if you suppose I am going to let you make a fool of me, just dismiss that notion from your mind. What are you looking forward to, if you can't behave properly as my wife? There is disgrace for you, if you like to have it, but I don't know anything else; and as to Deronda, it's quite clear that he hangs back from you.'

'It is all false!' said Gwendolen, bitterly. 'You don't in the least imagine what is in my mind. I have seen enough of the disgrace that comes in that way. And you had better leave me at liberty to speak with any one I like. It would be better for you.'

'You will allow me to judge of that,' said Grandcourt, rising and moving to a little distance towards the window, but standing there playing with his whiskers as if he were awaiting something.

Gwendolen's words had so clear and tremendous a meaning for herself, that she thought they must have expressed it to Grandcourt, and had no sooner uttered them than she dreaded their effect. But his soul was garrisoned against presentiments and fears: he had the courage and confidence that belong to domination, and he was at that moment feeling perfectly satisfied that he held his wife with bit and bridle. By the time they had been married a year she would cease to be restive. He continued standing with his air of indifference, till she felt her habitual stifling consciousness of having an immovable obstruction in her life, like the nightmare of beholding a single form that serves to arrest all passage though the wide country lies open.

'What decision have you come to?' he said, presently looking at her. 'What orders shall I give?'

'Oh, let us go,' said Gwendolen. The walls had begun to be an imprisonment, and while there was breath in this man he would have the mastery over her. His words had the power of thumbscrews and the cold touch of the rack. To resist was to act like a stupid animal unable to measure results.

So the boat was ordered. She even went down to the quay again with him to see it before mid-day. Grandcourt had recovered perfect quietude of temper, and had a scornful satisfaction in the attention given by the nautical groups to the *milord,* owner of the handsome yacht which had just put in for repairs, and who being an Englishman was naturally so at home on the sea that he could manage a sail with the same ease that he could manage a horse. The sort of exultation he had discerned in Gwendolen this morning she now thought that she discerned in him; and it was true that he had set his mind on this boating, and carried out his purpose as something that people might not expect him to do, with the gratified impulse of a strong will which had nothing better to exert itself upon. He had remarkable physical courage, and was proud of it – or rather he had a great contempt for the coarser, bulkier men who generally had less. Moreover, he was ruling that Gwendolen should go with him.

And when they came down again at five o'clock, equipped for their boating, the scene was as good as a theatrical representation for all beholders. This handsome, fair-skinned English couple manifesting the usual eccentricity of their nation, both of them proud, pale, and calm, without a smile on their faces, moving like creatures who were fulfilling a supernatural destiny – it was a thing to go out and see, a thing to paint. The husband's chest, back, and arms, showed very well in his close-fitting dress, and the wife was declared to be like a statue.

Some suggestions were proffered concerning a possible change in the breeze, and the necessary care in putting about, but Grandcourt's manner made the speakers understand that they were too officious, and that he knew better than they.

Gwendolen, keeping her impassible air, as they moved away from the strand, felt her imagination obstinately at work. She was not afraid of any outward dangers – she was afraid of her own wishes, which were taking shapes possible and impossible, like a cloud of demon-faces. She was afraid of her own hatred, which under the cold iron touch that had compelled her to-day had gathered a fierce intensity. As she sat guiding the tiller under her husband's eyes, doing just what he told her, the strife within her seemed like her own effort to escape from herself. She clung to the thought of Deronda: she persuaded herself that he would not go away while she was there – he knew that she needed help. The sense that he was there would save her from acting out the evil within. And yet quick, quick, came images, plans of evil that would come again and seize her in the night, like furies preparing the deed that they would straightway avenge.

They were taken out of the port and carried eastward by a gentle breeze. Some clouds tempered the sunlight, and the hour was always deepening towards the supreme beauty of evening. Sails larger and smaller changed their aspect like sensitive things, and made a cheerful companionship, alternately near and far. The grand city shone more vaguely, the mountains looked out above it, and there was stillness as in an island

sanctuary. Yet suddenly Gwendolen let her hands fall, and said in a scarcely audible tone, ‘God help me!’

‘What is the matter?’ said Grandcourt, not distinguishing the words.

‘Oh, nothing,’ said Gwendolen, rousing herself from her momentary forgetfulness and resuming the ropes.

‘Don’t you find this pleasant?’ said Grandcourt.

‘Very.’

‘You admit now we couldn’t have done anything better?’

‘No – I see nothing better. I think we shall go on always, like the Flying Dutchman,’ said Gwendolen, wildly.

Grandcourt gave her one of his narrow, examining glances, and then said, ‘If you like, we can go to Spezia in the morning, and let them take us up there.’

‘No; I shall like nothing better than this.’

‘Very well; we’ll do the same to-morrow. But we must be turning in soon. I shall put about.’

Chapter Fifty-Five

Ritorna à tua scienza
Che vuol, quanto la cosa è più perfetta
Più senta il bene, e così la doglienza.

– DANTE[20]

When Deronda met Gwendolen and Grandcourt on the staircase, his mind was seriously preoccupied. He had just been summoned to the second interview with his mother.

In two hours after his parting from her he knew that the Princess Halm-Eberstein had left the hotel, and so far as the purpose of his journey to Genoa was concerned he might himself have set off on his way to Mainz, to deliver the letter from Joseph Kalonymos, and get possession of the family chest. But mixed mental conditions, which did not resolve themselves into definite reasons, hindered him from departure. Long after the farewell he was kept passive by a weight of retrospective feeling. He lived again, with the new keenness of emotive memory, through the exciting scenes which seemed past only in the sense of preparation for their actual presence in his soul. He allowed himself in his solitude to sob, with perhaps more than a woman's acuteness of compassion, over that woman's life so near to his, and yet so remote. He beheld the world changed for him by the certitude of ties that altered the poise of hopes and fears, and gave him a new sense of fellowship, as if under cover of the night he had joined the wrong band of wanderers, and found with the rise of morning that the tents of his kindred were grouped far off. He had a quivering imaginative sense of close relation to the grandfather who had been animated by strong impulses and beloved thoughts, which were now perhaps being roused from their slumber within himself. And through all this passionate meditation Mordecai and Mirah were always present, as beings who clasped hands with him in sympathetic silence.

Of such quick, responsive fibre was Deronda made, under that mantle of self-controlled reserve into which early experience had thrown so much of his young strength.

When the persistent ringing of a bell as a signal reminded him of the hour he thought of looking into *Bradshaw,* and making the brief necessary preparations for starting by the next train – thought of it, but made no movement in consequence. Wishes went to Mainz and what he was to get possession of there – to London and the beings there who made the strongest attachments of his life; but there were other wishes that clung in these moments to Genoa, and they kept him where he was by that force which urges us to linger over an interview that carries a presentiment of final farewell or of overshadowing sorrow. Deronda did not formally say, 'I will stay over to-night, because it is Friday, and I should like to go to the evening service at the synagogue where they must all have gone; and besides, I may see the Grandcourts again.' But simply, instead of packing and ringing for his bill, he sat doing nothing at all, while his mind went to the synagogue and saw faces there probably little different from those of his grandfather's time, and heard the Spanish-Hebrew liturgy which had lasted through the seasons of wandering generations like a plant with wandering seed, that gives the far-off lands a kinship to the exile's home – while, also, his mind went towards Gwendolen, with anxious remembrance of what had been, and with a half-admitted impression that it would be hardness in him willingly to go away at once without making some effort, in spite of Grandcourt's probable dislike, to manifest the continuance of his sympathy with her since their abrupt parting.

In this state of mind he deferred departure, ate his dinner without sense of flavour, rose from it quickly to find the synagogue, and in passing the porter asked if Mr and Mrs Grandcourt were still in the hotel, and what was the number of their apartment. The porter gave him the number, but added that they were gone out boating. That information had somehow power enough over Deronda to divide his thoughts with the memories wakened among the sparse *talithim* and keen dark faces of worshippers whose way of taking awful prayers and invocations with the easy familiarity which might be called Hebrew dyed Italian, made him reflect that his grandfather, according to the Princess's hints of his character, must have been almost as exceptional a Jew as Mordecai. But were not men of ardent zeal and far-reaching hope everywhere exceptional? – the men who had the visions which, as Mordecai said, were the creators and feeders of the world – moulding and feeding the more passive life which without them would dwindle and shrivel into the narrow tenacity of insects, unshaken by thoughts beyond the reaches of their antennae. Something of a

mournful impatience perhaps added itself to the solicitude about Gwendolen (a solicitude that had room to grow in his present release from immediate cares) as an incitement to hasten from the synagogue and choose to take his evening walk towards the quay, always a favourite haunt with him, and just now attractive with the possibility that he might be in time to see the Grandcourts come in from their boating. In this case, he resolved that he would advance to greet them deliberately, and ignore any grounds that the husband might have for wishing him elsewhere.

The sun had set behind a bank of cloud, and only a faint yellow light was giving its farewell kisses to the waves, which were agitated by an active breeze. Deronda, sauntering slowly within sight of what took place on the strand, observed the groups there concentrating their attention on a sailing boat which was advancing swiftly landward, being rowed by two men. Amidst the clamorous talk in various languages, Deronda held it the surer means of getting information not to ask questions, but to elbow his way to the foreground and be an unobstructed witness of what was occurring. Telescopes were being used, and loud statements made that the boat held somebody who had been drowned. One said it was the *milord* who had gone out in a sailing boat; another maintained that the prostrate figure he discerned was *miladi;* a Frenchman who had no glass would rather say that it was *milord* who had probably taken his wife out to drown her, according to the national practice – a remark which an English skipper immediately commented on in our native idiom (as nonsense which – had undergone a mining operation), and further dismissed by the decision that the reclining figure was a woman. For Deronda, terribly excited by fluctuating fears, the strokes of the oars as he watched them were divided by swift visions of events, possible and impossible, which might have brought about this issue, or this broken-off fragment of an issue, with a worse half undisclosed – if this woman apparently snatched from the waters were really Mrs Grandcourt.

But soon there was no longer any doubt: the boat was being pulled to land, and he saw Gwendolen half raising herself on her hands, by her own effort, under her heavy covering of tarpaulin and pea-jackets – pale as one of the sheeted dead, shivering, with wet hair streaming, a wild amazed consciousness in her eyes, as if she had waked up in a world where some judgment was impending, and the beings she saw around were coming to seize her. The first rower who jumped to land was also wet through, and ran off; the sailors, close about the boat, hindered Deronda from advancing, and he could only look on while Gwendolen gave scared glances, and seemed to shrink with terror as she was carefully, tenderly helped out, and led on by the strong arms of those rough, bronzed men, her wet clothes clinging about her limbs, and adding to the impediment of her weakness. Suddenly her wandering eyes fell on Deronda, standing before her, and immediately, as if she had been expecting him and looking for him, she tried to stretch out her arms, which were held back by her supporters, saying, in a muffled voice –

'It is come, it is come! He is dead!'

'Hush, hush!' said Deronda, in a tone of authority; 'quiet yourself.' Then to the men who were assisting her, 'I am a connection of this lady's husband. If you will get her on to the *Italia* as quickly as possible, I will undertake everything else.'

He stayed behind to hear from the remaining boatman that her husband had gone down irrecoverably, and that his boat was left floating empty. He and his comrade had heard a cry, had come up in time to see the lady jump in after her husband, and had got her out fast enough to save her from much damage.

After this, Deronda hastened to the hotel, to assure himself that the best medical help would be provided; and being satisfied on this point, he telegraphed the event to Sir Hugo, begging him to come forthwith, and also to Mr Gascoigne, whose address at the Rectory made his nearest known way of getting the information to Gwendolen's mother. Certain words of Gwendolen's in the past had come back to him with the effectiveness of an inspiration: in moments of agitated confession she had spoken of her mother's presence as a possible help, if she could have had it.

Chapter Fifty-Six

> The pang, the curse with which they died,
> Had never passed away:
> I could not draw my eyes from theirs,
> Nor lift them up to pray.
>
> – COLERIDGE

Deronda did not take off his clothes that night. Gwendolen, after insisting on seeing him again before she would consent to be undrest, had been perfectly quiet, and had only asked him, with a whispering, repressed eagerness, to promise that he would come to her when she sent for him in the morning. Still, the possibility that a change might come over her, the danger of a supervening feverish condition, and the suspicion that something in the late catastrophe was having an effect which might betray itself in excited words, acted as a foreboding within him. He mentioned to her attendant that he should keep himself ready to be called if there were any alarming change of symptoms, making it understood by all concerned that he was in communication with her friends in England, and felt bound meanwhile to take all care on her behalf – a position which it was the easier for him to assume, because he was well known to Grandcourt's valet, the only old servant who had come on the late voyage.

But when fatigue from the strangely various emotion of the day at last sent Deronda to sleep, he remained undisturbed except by the morning dreams which came as a tangled web of yesterday's events, and finally waked him with an image drawn by his pressing anxiety.

Still, it was morning, and there had been no summons – an augury which cheered him while he made his toilet, and reflected that it was too early to send inquiries. Later, he learned that she had passed a too wakeful night, but had shown no violent signs of agitation, and was at last sleeping. He wondered at the force that dwelt in this creature, so alive to dread; for he had an irresistible impression that even under the effects of a severe physical shock she was mastering herself with a determination of concealment. For his own part, he thought that his sensibilities had been blunted by what he had been going through in the meeting with his mother: he seemed to himself now to be only fulfilling claims, and his more passionate sympathy was in abeyance. He had lately been living so keenly in an experience quite apart from Gwendolen's lot, that his present cares for her were like a revisiting of scenes familiar in the past, and there was not yet a complete revival of the inward response to them.

Meanwhile he employed himself in getting a formal, legally-recognised statement from the fishermen who had rescued Gwendolen. Few details came to light. The boat in which Grandcourt had gone out had been found drifting with its sail loose, and had been towed in. The fishermen thought it likely that he had been knocked overboard by the flapping of the sail while putting about, and that he had not known how to swim; but, though they were near, their attention had been first arrested by a cry which seemed like that of a man in distress, and while they were hastening with their oars, they heard a shriek from the lady, and saw her jump in.

On re-entering the hotel, Deronda was told that Gwendolen had risen, and was desiring to see him. He was shown into a room darkened by blinds and curtains, where she was seated with a white shawl wrapped round her, looking towards the opening door like one waiting uneasily. But her long hair was gathered up and coiled carefully, and, through all, the blue stars in her ears had kept their place: as she started impulsively to her full height, sheathed in her white shawl, her face and neck not less white, except for a purple line under her eyes, her lips a little apart with the peculiar expression of one accused and helpless, she looked like the unhappy ghost of that Gwendolen Harleth whom Deronda had seen turning with firm lips and proud self-possession from her losses at the gaming-table. The sight pierced him with pity, and the effects of all their past relation began to revive within him.

'I beseech you to rest – not to stand,' said Deronda, as he approached her; and she obeyed, falling back into her chair again.

'Will you sit down near me?' she said. 'I want to speak very low.'

She was in a large arm-chair, and he drew a small one near to her side. The action seemed to touch her

peculiarly: turning her pale face full upon his, which was very near, she said, in the lowest audible tone, 'You know I am a guilty woman?'

Deronda himself turned paler as he said, 'I know nothing.' He did not dare to say more.

'He is dead.' She uttered this with the same undertoned decision.

'Yes,' said Deronda, in a mournful suspense which made him reluctant to speak.

'His face will not be seen above the water again,' said Gwendolen, in a tone that was not louder, but of a suppressed eagerness, while she held both her hands clenched.

'No.'

'Not by any one else – only by me – a dead face – I shall never get away from it.'

It was with an inward voice of desperate self-repression that she spoke these last words, while she looked away from Deronda towards something at a distance from her on the floor. Was she seeing the whole event – her own acts included – through an exaggerating medium of excitement and horror? Was she in a state of delirium into which there entered a sense of concealment and necessity for self-repression? Such thoughts glanced through Deronda as a sort of hope. But imagine the conflict of feeling that kept him silent. She was bent on confession, and he dreaded hearing her confession. Against his better will, he shrank from the task that was laid on him: he wished, and yet rebuked the wish as cowardly, that she could bury her secrets in her own bosom. He was not a priest. He dreaded the weight of this woman's soul flung upon his own with imploring dependence. But she spoke again, hurriedly, looking at him –

'You will not say that I ought to tell the world? you will not say that I ought to be disgraced? I could not do it. I could not bear it. I cannot have my mother know. Not if I were dead. I could not have her know. I must tell you; but you will not say that any one else should know.'

'I can say nothing in my ignorance,' said Deronda, mournfully, 'except that I desire to help you.'

'I told you from the beginning – as soon as I could – I told you I was afraid of myself.' There was a piteous pleading in the low murmur to which Deronda turned his ear only. Her face afflicted him too much. 'I felt a hatred in me that was always working like an evil spirit – contriving things. Everything I could do to free myself came into my mind; and it got worse – all things got worse. That was why I asked you to come to me in town. I thought then I would tell you the worst about myself. I tried. But I could not tell everything. And *he* came in.'

She paused, while a shudder passed through her; but soon went on.

'I will tell you everything now. Do you think a woman who cried, and prayed, and struggled to be saved from herself, could be a murderess?'

'Great God!' said Deronda, in a deep, shaken voice, 'don't torture me needlessly. You have not murdered him. You threw yourself into the water with the impulse to save him. Tell me the rest afterwards. This death was an accident that you could not have hindered.'

'Don't be impatient with me.' The tremor, the childlike beseeching in these words compelled Deronda to turn his head and look at her face. The poor quivering lips went on. 'You said – you used to say – you felt more for those who had done something wicked and were miserable; you said they might get better – they might be scourged into something better. If you had not spoken in that way, everything would have been worse. I *did* remember all you said to me. It came to me always. It came to me at the very last – that was the reason why I— But now, if you cannot bear with me when I tell you everything – if you turn away from me and forsake me, what shall I do? Am I worse than I was when you found me and wanted to make me better? All the wrong I have done was in me then – and more – and more – if you had not come and been patient with me. And now – will you forsake me?'

Her hands which had been so tightly clenched some minutes before, were now helplessly relaxed and trembling on the arm of her chair. Her quivering lips remained parted as she ceased speaking. Deronda could not answer; he was obliged to look away. He took one of her hands, and clasped it as if they were going to walk together like two children: it was the only way in which he could answer, 'I will not forsake you.' And all the while he felt as if he were putting his name to a blank paper which might be filled up terribly. Their attitude, his averted face with its expression of a suffering which he was solemnly resolved to undergo, might have told half the truth of the situation to a beholder who had suddenly entered.

That grasp was an entirely new experience to Gwendolen: she had never before had from any man a sign of tenderness which her own being had needed, and she interpreted its powerful effect on her into a promise of inexhaustible patience and constancy. The stream of renewed strength made it possible for her to go on as she had begun – with that fitful, wandering confession where the sameness of experience seems to nullify the sense of time or of order in events. She began again in a fragmentary way –

'All sorts of contrivances in my mind – but all so difficult. And I fought against them – I was terrified at them – I saw his dead face' – here her voice sank almost to a whisper close to Deronda's ear – 'ever so long ago I saw it; and I wished him to be dead. And yet it terrified me. I was like two creatures. I could not speak –

I wanted to kill – it was as strong as thirst – and then directly – I felt beforehand I had done something dreadful, unalterable – that would make me like an evil spirit. And it came – it came.'

She was silent a moment or two, as if her memory had lost itself in a web where each mesh drew all the rest.

'It had all been in my mind when I first spoke to you – when we were at the Abbey. I had done something then. I could not tell you that. It was the only thing I did towards carrying out my thoughts. They went about over everything; but they all remained like dreadful dreams – all but one. I did one act – and I never undid it – it is there still – as long ago as when we were at Ryelands. There it was – something my fingers longed for among the beautiful toys in the cabinet in my boudoir – small and sharp, like a long willow leaf in a silver sheath. I locked it in the drawer of my dressing-case. I was continually haunted with it, and how I should use it. I fancied myself putting it under my pillow. But I never did. I never looked at it again. I dared not unlock the drawer: it had a key all to itself; and not long ago, when we were in the yacht, I dropped the key into the deep water. It was my wish to drop it and deliver myself. After that I began to think how I could open the drawer without the key: and when I found we were to stay at Genoa, it came into my mind that I could get it opened privately at the hotel. But then, when we were going up the stairs, I met you; and I thought I should talk to you alone and tell you this – everything I could not tell you in town; and then I was forced to go out in the boat.'

A sob had for the first time risen with the last words, and she sank back in her chair. The memory of that acute disappointment seemed for the moment to efface what had come since. Deronda did not look at her, but he said, insistently –

'And it has all remained in your imagination. It has gone on only in your thought. To the last the evil temptation has been resisted?'

There was silence. The tears had rolled down her cheeks. She pressed her handkerchief against them and sat upright. She was summoning her resolution; and again, leaning a little towards Deronda's ear, she began in a whisper –

'No, no; I will tell you everything as God knows it. I will tell you no falsehood; I will tell you the exact truth. What should I do else? I used to think I could never be wicked. I thought of wicked people as if they were a long way off me. Since then I have been wicked. I have felt wicked. And everything has been a punishment to me – all the things I used to wish for – it is as if they had been made red-hot. The very daylight has often been a punishment to me. Because – you know – I ought not to have married. That was the beginning of it. I wronged some one else. I broke my promise. I meant to get pleasure for myself, and it all turned to misery. I wanted to make my gain out of another's loss – you remember? – it was like roulette – and the money burnt into me. And I could not complain. It was as if I had prayed that another should lose and I should win. And I had won. I knew it all – I knew I was guilty. When we were on the sea, and I lay awake at night in the cabin, I sometimes felt that everything I had done lay open without excuse – nothing was hidden – how could anything be known to me only? – it was not my own knowledge, it was God's that had entered into me, and even the stillness – everything held a punishment for me – everything but you. I always thought that you would not want me to be punished – you would have tried and helped me to be better. And only thinking of that helped me. You will not change – you will not want to punish me now?'

Again a sob had risen.

'God forbid!' groaned Deronda. But he sat motionless.

This long wandering with the poor conscience-stricken one over her past was difficult to bear, but he dared not again urge her with a question. He must let her mind follow its own need. She unconsciously left intervals in her retrospect, not clearly distinguishing between what she said and what she had only an inward vision of. Her next words came after such an interval.

'That all made it so hard when I was forced to go in the boat. Because when I saw you it was an unexpected joy, and I thought I could tell you everything – about the locked-up drawer and what I had not told you before. And if I had told you, and knew it was in your mind, it would have less power over me. I hoped and trusted in that. For after all my struggles and my crying, the hatred and rage, the temptation that frightened me, the longing, the thirst for what I dreaded, always came back. And that disappointment – when I was quite shut out from speaking to you, and I was driven to go in the boat – brought all the evil back, as if I had been locked in a prison with it and no escape. Oh, it seems so long ago now since I stepped into that boat! I could have given up everything in that moment, to have the forked lightning for a weapon to strike him dead.'

Some of the compressed fierceness that she was recalling seemed to find its way into her undertoned utterance. After a little silence she said, with agitated hurry –

'If he were here again, what should I do? I cannot wish him here – and yet I cannot bear his dead face. I was a coward. I ought to have borne contempt. I ought to have gone away – gone and wandered like a beggar rather than stay to feel like a fiend. But turn where I would there was something I could not bear. Sometimes I

thought he would kill *me* if I resisted his will. But now – his dead face is there, and I cannot bear it.'

Suddenly loosing Deronda's hand, she started up, stretching her arms to their full length upward, and said with a sort of moan –

'I have been a cruel woman! What can *I* do but cry for help? *I* am sinking. Die – die – you are forsaken – go down, go down into darkness. Forsaken – no pity – *I* shall be forsaken.'

She sank in her chair again and broke into sobs. Even Deronda had no place in her consciousness at that moment. He was completely unmanned. Instead of finding, as he had imagined, that his late experience had dulled his susceptibility to fresh emotion, it seemed that the lot of this young creature, whose swift travel from her bright rash girlhood into this agony of remorse he had had to behold in helplessness, pierced him the deeper because it came close upon another sad revelation of spiritual conflict: he was in one of those moments when the very anguish of passionate pity makes us ready to choose that we will know pleasure no more, and live only for the stricken and afflicted. He had risen from his seat while he watched that terrible outburst – which seemed the more awful to him because, even in this supreme agitation, she kept the suppressed voice of one who confesses in secret. At last he felt impelled to turn his back towards her and walk to a distance.

But presently there was stillness. Her mind had opened to the sense that he had gone away from her. When Deronda turned round to approach her again, he saw her face bent towards him, her eyes dilated, her lips parted. She was an image of timid forlorn beseeching – too timid to entreat in words while he kept himself aloof from her. Was she forsaken by him – now – already? But his eyes met hers sorrowfully – met hers for the first time fully since she had said, 'You know I am a guilty woman;' and that full glance in its intense mournfulness seemed to say, 'I know it, but I shall all the less forsake you.' He sat down by her side again in the same attitude – without turning his face towards her and without again taking her hand.

Once more Gwendolen was pierced, as she had been by his face of sorrow at the Abbey, with a compunction less egoistic than that which urged her to confess, and she said, in a tone of loving regret –

'I make you very unhappy.'

Deronda gave an indistinct 'Oh,' just shrinking together and changing his attitude a little. Then he had gathered resolution enough to say clearly, 'There is no question of being happy or unhappy. What I most desire at this moment is what will most help you. Tell me all you feel it a relief to tell.'

Devoted as these words were, they widened his spiritual distance from her, and she felt it more difficult to speak: she had a vague need of getting nearer to that compassion which seemed to be regarding her from a halo of superiority, and the need turned into an impulse to humble herself more. She was ready to throw herself on her knees before him; but no – her wonderfully mixed consciousness held checks on that impulse, and she was kept silent and motionless by the pressure of opposing needs. Her stillness made Deronda at last say –

'Perhaps you are too weary. Shall I go away, and come again whenever you wish it?'

'No, no,' said Gwendolen – the dread of his leaving her bringing back her power of speech. She went on with her low-toned eagerness, 'I want to tell you what it was that came over me in that boat. I was full of rage at being obliged to go – full of rage – and I could do nothing but sit there like a galley-slave. And then we got away – out of the port – into the deep – and everything was still – and we never looked at each other, only he spoke to order me – and the very light about me seemed to hold me a prisoner and force me to sit as I did. It came over me that when I was a child I used to fancy sailing away into a world where people were not forced to live with any one they did not like – I did not like my father-in-law to come home. And now, I thought, just the opposite had come to me. I had stept into a boat, and my life was a sailing and sailing away – gliding on and no help – always into solitude with *him,* away from deliverance. And because I felt more helpless than ever, my thoughts went out over worse things – I longed for worse things – I had cruel wishes – I fancied impossible ways of – I did not want to die myself; I was afraid of our being drowned together. If it had been any use I should have prayed – I should have prayed that something might befall him. I should have prayed that he might sink out of my sight and leave me alone. I knew no way of killing him there, but I did, I did kill him in my thoughts.'

She sank into silence for a minute, submerged by the weight of memory which no words could represent.

'But yet all the while I felt that I was getting more wicked. And what had been with me so much, came to me just then – what you once said – about dreading to increase my wrong-doing and my remorse – I should hope for nothing then. It was all like a writing of fire within me. Getting wicked was misery – being shut out for ever from knowing what you – what better lives were. That had always been coming back to me in the midst of bad thoughts – it came back to me then – but yet with a despair – a feeling that it was no use – evil wishes were too strong. I remember then letting go the tiller and saying "God help me!" But then I was forced to take it again and go on; and the evil longings, the evil prayers came again and blotted everything else dim, till, in the midst of them – I don't know how it was – he was turning the sail – there was a gust – he was struck – I know nothing – I only know that I saw my wish outside me.'

She began to speak more hurriedly, and in more of a whisper.

'I saw him sink, and my heart gave a leap as if it were going out of me. I think I did not move. I kept my hands tight. It was long enough for me to be glad, and yet to think it was no use – he would come up again. And he *was* come – farther off – the boat had moved. It was all like lightning. "The rope!" he called out in a voice – not his own – I hear it now – and I stooped for the rope – I felt I must – I felt sure he could swim, and he would come back whether or not, and I dreaded him. That was in my mind – he would come back. But he was gone down again, and I had the rope in my hand – no, there he was again – his face above the water – and he cried again – and I held my hand, and my heart said, "Die!" – and he sank; and I felt "It is done – I am wicked, I am lost!" – and I had the rope in my hand – I don't know what I thought – I was leaping away from myself – I would have saved him then. I was leaping from my crime, and there it was – close to me as I fell – there was the dead face – dead, dead. It can never be altered. That was what happened. That was what I did. You know it all. It can never be altered.'

She sank back in her chair, exhausted with the agitation of memory and speech. Deronda felt the burden on his spirit less heavy than the foregoing dread. The word 'guilty' had held a possibility of interpretations worse than the fact; and Gwendolen's confession, for the very reason that her conscience made her dwell on the determining power of her evil thoughts, convinced him the more that there had been throughout a counterbalancing struggle of her better will. It seemed almost certain that her murderous thought had had no outward effect – that, quite apart from it, the death was inevitable. Still, a question as to the outward effectiveness of a criminal desire dominant enough to impel even a momentary act, cannot alter our judgment of the desire; and Deronda shrank from putting that question forward in the first instance. He held it likely that Gwendolen's remorse aggravated her inward guilt, and that she gave the character of decisive action to what had been an inappreciably instantaneous glance of desire. But her remorse was the precious sign of a recoverable nature; it was the culmination of that self-disapproval which had been the awakening of a new life within her; it marked her off from the criminals whose only regret is failure in securing their evil wish. Deronda could not utter one word to diminish that sacred aversion to her worst self – that thorn-pressure which must come with the crowning of the sorrowful Better, suffering because of the Worse. All this mingled thought and feeling kept him silent; speech was too momentous to be ventured on rashly. There were no words of comfort that did not carry some sacrilege. If he had opened his lips to speak, he could only have echoed, 'It can never be altered – it remains unaltered, to alter other things.' But he was silent and motionless – he did not know how long – before he turned to look at her, and saw her sunk back with closed eyes, like a lost, weary, storm-beaten white doe, unable to rise and pursue its unguided way. He rose and stood before her. The movement touched her consciousness, and she opened her eyes with a slight quivering that seemed like fear.

'You must rest now. Try to rest: try to sleep. And may I see you again this evening – to-morrow – when you have had some rest? Let us say no more now.'

The tears came, and she could not answer except by a slight movement of the head. Deronda rang for attendance, spoke urgently of the necessity that she should be got to rest, and then left her.

Chapter Fifty-Seven

The unripe grape, the ripe, and the dried. All things are changes, not into nothing, but into that which is not at present.

– MARCUS AURELIUS

Deeds are the pulse of Time, his beating life,
And righteous or unrighteous, being done,
Must throb in after-throbs till Time itself
Be laid in stillness, and the universe
Quiver and breathe upon no mirror more.

In the evening she sent for him again. It was already near the hour at which she had been brought in from the sea the evening before, and the light was subdued enough with blinds drawn up and windows open. She was seated gazing fixedly on the sea, resting her cheek on her hand, looking less shattered than when he had left her, but with a deep melancholy in her expression which as Deronda approached her passed into an anxious timidity. She did not put out her hand, but said, 'How long ago it is!' Then, 'Will you sit near me again a little while?'

He placed himself by her side as he had done before, and seeing that she turned to him with that indefinable expression which implies a wish to say something, he waited for her to speak. But again she looked towards the window silently, and again turned with the same expression, which yet did not issue in speech. There was some fear hindering her, and Deronda, wishing to relieve her timidity, averted his face. Presently he heard her cry imploringly –

'You will not say that any one else should know?'

'Most decidedly not,' said Deronda. 'There is no action that ought to be taken in consequence. There is no injury that could be righted in that way. There is no retribution that any mortal could apportion justly.'

She was so still during a pause, that she seemed to be holding her breath before she said –

'But if I had not had that murderous will – that moment – if I had thrown the rope on the instant – perhaps it would have hindered death?'

'No – I think not,' said Deronda, slowly. 'If it were true that he could swim, he must have been seized with cramp. With your quickest, utmost effort, it seems impossible that you could have done anything to save him. That momentary murderous will cannot, I think, have altered the course of events. Its effect is confined to the motives in your own breast. Within ourselves our evil will is momentous, and sooner or later it works its way outside us – it may be in the vitiation that breeds evil acts, but also it may be in the self-abhorrence that stings us into better striving.'

'I am saved from robbing others – there are others – they will have everything – they will have what they ought to have. I knew that some time before I left town. You do not suspect me of wrong desires about those things?' She spoke hesitatingly.

'I had not thought of them,' said Deronda; 'I was thinking too much of the other things.'

'Perhaps you don't quite know the beginning of it all,' said Gwendolen, slowly, as if she were overcoming her reluctance. 'There was some one else he ought to have married. And I knew it, and I told her I would not hinder it. And I went away – that was when you first saw me. But then we became poor all at once, and I was very miserable, and I was tempted. I thought, "I shall do as I like and make everything right." I persuaded myself. And it was all different. It was all dreadful. Then came hatred and wicked thoughts. That was how it all came. I told you I was afraid of myself. And I did what you told me – I did try to make my fear a safeguard. I thought of what would be if I—I felt what would come – how I should dread the morning – wishing it would be always night – and yet in the darkness always seeing something – seeing death. If you did not know how miserable I was, you might – but now it has all been no use. I can care for nothing but saving the rest from knowing – poor mamma, who has never been happy.'

There was silence again before she said with a repressed sob – 'You cannot bear to look at me any more. You think I am too wicked. You do not believe that I can become any better – worth anything – worthy enough – I shall always be too wicked to—' The voice broke off helpless.

Deronda's heart was pierced. He turned his eyes on her poor beseeching face and said, 'I believe that you

may become worthier than you have ever yet been – worthy to lead a life that may be a blessing. No evil dooms us hopelessly except the evil we love, and desire to continue in, and make no effort to escape from. You *have* made efforts – you will go on making them.'

'But you were the beginning of them. You must not forsake me,' said Gwendolen, leaning with her clasped hands on the arm of her chair and looking at him, while her face bore piteous traces of the life-experience concentrated in the twenty-four hours – that new terrible life lying on the other side of the deed which fulfils a criminal desire. 'I will bear any penance. I will lead any life you tell me. But you must not forsake me. You must be near. If you had been near me – if I could have said everything to you, I should have been different. You will not forsake me?'

'It could never be my impulse to forsake you,' said Deronda promptly, with that voice which, like his eyes, had the unintentional effect of making his ready sympathy seem more personal and special than it really was. And in that moment he was not himself quite free from a foreboding of some such self-committing effect. His strong feeling for this stricken creature could not hinder rushing images of future difficulty. He continued to meet her appealing eyes as he spoke, but it was with the painful consciousness that to her ear his words might carry a promise which one day would seem unfulfilled: he was making an indefinite promise to an indefinite hope. Anxieties, both immediate and distant, crowded on his thought, and it was under their influence that, after a moment's silence, he said –

'I expect Sir Hugo Mallinger to arrive by to-morrow night at least; and I am not without hope that Mrs Davilow may shortly follow him. Her presence will be the greatest comfort to you – it will give you a motive, to save her from unnecessary pain?'

'Yes, yes – I will try. And you will not go away?'

'Not till after Sir Hugo has come.'

'But we shall all go to England?'

'As soon as possible,' said Deronda, not wishing to enter into particulars.

Gwendolen looked towards the window again with an expression which seemed like a gradual awakening to new thoughts. The twilight was perceptibly deepening, but Deronda could see a movement in her eyes and hands such as accompanies a return of perception in one who has been stunned.

'You will always be with Sir Hugo now?' she said presently, looking at him. 'You will always live at the Abbey – or else at Diplow?'

'I am quite uncertain where I shall live,' said Deronda, colouring.

She was warned by his changed colour that she had spoken too rashly, and fell silent. After a little while she began, again looking away –

'It is impossible to think how my life will go on. I think now it would be better for me to be poor and obliged to work.'

'New promptings will come as the days pass. When you are among your friends again, you will discern new duties,' said Deronda. 'Make it a task now to get as well and calm – as much like yourself as you can, before—' He hesitated.

'Before my mother comes,' said Gwendolen. 'Ah! I must be changed. I have not looked at myself. Should you have known me,' she added, turning towards him, 'if you had met me now? – should you have known me for the one you saw at Leubronn?'

'Yes, I should have known you,' said Deronda, mournfully. 'The outside change is not great. I should have seen at once that it was you, and that you had gone through some great sorrow.'

'Don't wish now that you had never seen me – don't wish that,' said Gwendolen, imploringly, while the tears gathered.

'I should despise myself for wishing it,' said Deronda. 'How could I know what I was wishing? We must find our duties in what comes to us, not in what we imagine might have been. If I took to foolish wishing of that sort, I should wish – not that I had never seen you, but that I had been able to save you from this.'

'You have saved me from worse,' said Gwendolen, in a sobbing voice. 'I should have been worse if it had not been for you. If you had not been good, I should have been more wicked than I am.'

'It will be better for me to go now,' said Deronda, worn in spirit by the perpetual strain of this scene. 'Remember what we said of your task – to get well and calm before other friends come.'

He rose as he spoke, and she gave him her hand submissively. But when he had left her she sank on her knees, in hysterical crying. The distance between them was too great. She was a banished soul – beholding a possible life which she had sinned herself away from.

She was found in this way, crushed on the floor. Such grief seemed natural in a poor lady whose husband had been drowned in her presence.

BOOK EIGHT

Fruit and Seed

Chapter Fifty-Eight

Much adoe there was, God wot;
He wold love and she wold not.

– NICHOLAS BRETON

Extension, we know, is a very imperfect measure of things; and the length of the sun's journeying can no more tell us how far life has advanced than the acreage of a field can tell us what growths may be active within it. A man may go south, and, stumbling over a bone, may meditate upon it till he has found a new starting-point for anatomy; or eastward, and discover a new key to language telling a new story of races; or he may head an expedition that opens new continental pathways, get himself maimed in body, and go through a whole heroic poem of resolve and endurance; and at the end of a few months he may come back to find his neighbours grumbling at the same parish grievance as before, or to see the same elderly gentleman treading the pavement in discourse with himself, shaking his head after the same percussive butcher's boy, and pausing at the same shop-window to look at the same prints. If the swiftest thinking has about the pace of a greyhound, the slowest must be supposed to move, like the limpet, by an apparent sticking, which after a good while is discerned to be a slight progression. Such differences are manifest in the variable intensity which we call human experience, from the revolutionary rush of change which makes a new inner and outer life, to that quiet recurrence of the familiar, which has no other epochs than those of hunger and the heavens.

Something of this contrast was seen in the year's experience which had turned the brilliant, self-confident Gwendolen Harleth of the Archery Meeting into the crushed penitent impelled to confess her unworthiness where it would have been her happiness to be held worthy; while it had left her family in Pennicote without deeper change than that of some outward habits, and some adjustment of prospects and intentions to reduced income, fewer visits, and fainter compliments. The Rectory was as pleasant a home as before: the red and pink peonies on the lawn, the rows of hollyhocks by the hedges, had bloomed as well this year as last: the Rector maintained his cheerful confidence in the goodwill of patrons and his resolution to deserve it by diligence in the fulfilment of his duties, whether patrons were likely to hear of it or not; doing nothing solely with an eye to promotion except, perhaps, the writing of two ecclesiastical articles, which, having no signature, were attributed to some one else, except by the patrons who had a special copy sent them, and these certainly knew the author but did not read the articles. The Rector, however, chewed no poisonous cud of suspicion on this point: he made marginal notes on his own copies to render them a more interesting loan, and was gratified that the Archdeacon and other authorities had nothing to say against the general tenor of his argument. Peaceful authorship! – living in the air of the fields and downs, and not in the thrice-breathed breath of criticism – bringing no Dantesque leanness; rather, assisting nutrition by complacency, and perhaps giving a more suffusive sense of achievement than the production of a whole *Divina Commedia.* Then there was the father's recovered delight in his favourite son, which was a happiness outweighing the loss of eighteen hundred a-year. Of whatever nature might be the hidden change wrought in Rex by the disappointment of his first love, it was apparently quite secondary to that evidence of more serious ambition which dated from the family misfortune; indeed, Mr Gascoigne was inclined to regard the little affair which had caused him so much anxiety the year before as an evaporation of superfluous moisture, a kind of finish to the baking process which the human dough demands. Rex had lately come down for a summer visit to the Rectory, bringing Anna home, and while he showed nearly the old liveliness with his brothers and sisters, he continued in his holiday the habits of the eager student, rising early in the morning and shutting himself up early in the evenings to carry on a fixed course of study.

'You don't repent the choice of the law as a profession, Rex?' said his father.

'There is no profession I would choose before it,' said Rex. 'I should like to end my life as a first-rate judge, and help to draw up a code. I reverse the famous dictum – I should say, "Give me something to do with making the laws, and let who will make the songs." '

'You will have to stow in an immense amount of rubbish, I suppose – that's the worst of it,' said the Rector.

'I don't see that law-rubbish is worse than any other sort. It is not so bad as the rubbishy literature that people choke their minds with. It doesn't make one so dull. Our wittiest men have often been lawyers. Any

orderly way of looking at things as cases and evidence seems to me better than a perpetual wash of odds and ends bearing on nothing in particular. And then, from a higher point of view, the foundations and the growth of law make the most interesting aspects of philosophy and history. Of course there will be a good deal that is troublesome, drudging, perhaps exasperating. But the great prizes in life can't be won easily – I see that.'

'Well, my boy, the best augury of a man's success in his profession is that he thinks it the finest in the world. But I fancy it is so with most work when a man goes into it with a will. Brewitt, the blacksmith, said to me the other day that his 'prentice had no mind to his trade; "and yet, sir," said Brewitt, "what would a young fellow have if he doesn't like the blacksmithing?" '

The Rector cherished a fatherly delight, which he allowed to escape him only in moderation. Warham, who had gone to India, he had easily borne parting with, but Rex was that romance of later life which a man sometimes finds in a son whom he recognises as superior to himself, picturing a future eminence for him according to a variety of famous examples. It was only to his wife that he said with decision, 'Rex will be a distinguished man, Nancy, I am sure of it – as sure as Paley's father was about his son.'

'Was Paley an old bachelor?' said Mrs Gascoigne.

'That is hardly to the point, my dear,' said the Rector, who did not remember that irrelevant detail. And Mrs Gascoigne felt that she had spoken rather weakly.

This quiet trotting of time at the Rectory was shared by the group who had exchanged the faded dignity of Offendene for the low white house not a mile off, well enclosed with evergreens, and known to the villagers as 'Jodson's.' Mrs Davilow's delicate face showed only a slight deepening of its mild melancholy, her hair only a few more silver lines, in consequence of the last year's trials; the four girls had bloomed out a little from being less in the shade; and the good Jocosa preserved her serviceable neutrality towards the pleasures and glories of the world as things made for those who were not 'in a situation.'

The low narrow drawing-room, enlarged by two quaint projecting windows, with lattices wide open on a July afternoon to the scent of monthly roses, the faint murmurs of the garden, and the occasional rare sound of hoofs and wheels seeming to clarify the succeeding silence, made rather a crowded lively scene, Rex and Anna being added to the usual group of six. Anna, always a favourite with her younger cousins, had much to tell of her new experience, and the acquaintances she had made in London; and when on her first visit she came alone, many questions were asked her about Gwendolen's house in Grosvenor Square, what Gwendolen herself had said, and what any one else had said about Gwendolen. Had Anna been to see Gwendolen after she had known about the yacht? No: – an answer which left speculation free concerning everything connected with that interesting unknown vessel beyond the fact that Gwendolen had written just before she set out to say that Mr Grandcourt and she were going yachting in the Mediterranean, and again from Marseilles to say that she was sure to like the yachting, the cabins were very elegant, and she would probably not send another letter till she had written quite a long diary filled with *dittos.* Also, this movement of Mr and Mrs Grandcourt had been mentioned in 'the newspaper;' so that altogether this new phase of Gwendolen's exalted life made a striking part of the sisters' romance, the book-devouring Isabel throwing in a corsair or two to make an adventure that might end well.

But when Rex was present, the girls, according to instructions, never started this fascinating topic; and to-day there had only been animated descriptions of the Meyricks and their extraordinary Jewish friends, which caused some astonished questioning from minds to which the idea of live Jews, out of a book, suggested a difference deep enough to be almost zoological, as of a strange race in Pliny's Natural History that might sleep under the shade of its own ears. Bertha could not imagine what Jews believed now; and had a dim idea that they rejected the Old Testament since it proved the New; Miss Merry thought that Mirah and her brother could 'never have been properly argued with,' and the amiable Alice did not mind what the Jews believed, she was sure she 'couldn't bear them.' Mrs Davilow corrected her by saying that the great Jewish families who were in society were quite what they ought to be both in London and Paris, but admitted that the commoner unconverted Jews were objectionable; and Isabel asked whether Mirah talked just as they did, or whether you might be with her and not find out that she was a Jewess.

Rex, who had no partisanship with the Israelites, having made a troublesome acquaintance with the minutiae of their ancient history in the form of 'cram,' was amusing himself by playfully exaggerating the notion of each speaker, while Anna begged them all to understand that he was only joking, when the laughter was interrupted by the bringing in of a letter for Mrs Davilow. A messenger had run with it in great haste from the Rectory. It enclosed a telegram, and as Mrs Davilow read and re-read it in silence and agitation, all eyes were turned on her with anxiety, but no one dared to speak. Looking up at last and seeing the young faces 'painted with fear,' she remembered that they might be imagining something worse than the truth, something like her own first dread which made her unable to understand what was written, and she said, with a sob which was half relief –

'My dears, Mr Grandcourt—' She paused an instant, and then began again, 'Mr Grandcourt is drowned.'

Rex started up as if a missile had been suddenly thrown into the room. He could not help himself, and Anna's first look was at him. But then, gathering some self-command while Mrs Davilow was reading what the Rector had written on the enclosing paper, he said –

'Can I do anything, aunt? Can I carry any word to my father from you?'

'Yes, dear. Tell him I will be ready – he is very good. He says he will go with me to Genoa – he will be here at half-past six. Jocosa and Alice, help me to get ready. She is safe – Gwendolen is safe – but she must be ill. I am sure she must be very ill. Rex, dear – Rex and Anna – go and tell your father I will be quite ready. I would not for the world lose another night. And bless him for being ready so soon. I can travel night and day till we get there.'

Rex and Anna hurried away through the sunshine which was suddenly solemn to them, without uttering a word to each other; she chiefly possessed by solicitude about any reopening of his wound, he struggling with a tumultuary crowd of thoughts that were an offence against his better will. The oppression being undiminished when they were at the Rectory gate, he said –

'Nannie, I will leave you to say everything to my father. If he wants me immediately, let me know. I shall stay in the shrubbery for ten minutes – only ten minutes.'

Who has been quite free from egoistic escapes of the imagination picturing desirable consequences on his own future in the presence of another's misfortune, sorrow, or death? The expected promotion or legacy is the common type of a temptation which makes speech and even prayer a severe avoidance of the most insistent thoughts, and sometimes raises an inward shame, a self-distaste, that is worse than any other form of unpleasant companionship. In Rex's nature the shame was immediate, and overspread like an ugly light all the hurrying images of what might come, which thrust themselves in with the idea that Gwendolen was again free – overspread them, perhaps, the more persistently because every phantasm of a hope was quickly nullified by a more substantial obstacle. Before the vision of 'Gwendolen free' rose the impassable vision of 'Gwendolen rich, exalted, courted;' and if in the former time, when both their lives were fresh, she had turned from his love with repugnance, what ground was there for supposing that her heart would be more open to him in the future?

These thoughts, which he wanted to master and suspend, were like a tumultuary ringing of opposing chimes that he could not escape from by running. During the last year he had brought himself into a state of calm resolve, and now it seemed that three words had been enough to undo all that difficult work, and cast him back into the wretched fluctuations of a longing which he recognised as simply perturbing and hopeless. And at this moment the activity of such longing had an untimeliness that made it repulsive to his better self. Excuse poor Rex: it was not much more than eighteen months since he had been laid low by an archer who sometimes touches his arrow with a subtle, lingering poison. The disappointment of a youthful passion has effects as incalculable as those of small-pox, which may make one person plain and a genius, another less plain and more foolish, another plain without detriment to his folly, and leave perhaps the majority without obvious change. Everything depends – not on the mere fact of disappointment, but – on the nature affected and the force that stirs it. In Rex's well-endowed nature, brief as the hope had been, the passionate stirring had gone deep, and the effect of disappointment was revolutionary, though fraught with a beneficent new order which retained most of the old virtues: in certain respects he believed that it had finally determined the bias and colour of his life. Now, however, it seemed that his inward peace was hardly more stable than that of republican Florence, and his heart no better than the alarm-bell that made work slack and tumult busy.

Rex's love had been of that sudden, penetrating, clinging sort which the ancients knew and sung, and in singing made a fashion of talk for many moderns whose experience has been by no means of a fiery, daemonic character. To have the consciousness suddenly steeped with another's personality, to have the strongest inclinations possessed by an image which retains its dominance in spite of change and apart from worthiness – nay, to feel a passion which clings the faster for the tragic pangs inflicted by a cruel, recognised unworthiness – is a phase of love which in the feeble and common-minded has a repulsive likeness to a blind animalism insensible to the higher sway of moral affinity or heaven-lit admiration. But when this attaching force is present in a nature not of brutish unmodifiableness, but of a human dignity that can risk itself safely, it may even result in a devotedness not unfit to be called divine in a higher sense than the ancient. Phlegmatic rationality stares and shakes its head at these unaccountable prepossessions, but they exist as undeniably as the winds and waves, determining here a wreck and there a triumphant voyage.

This sort of passion had nested in the sweet-natured, strong Rex, and he had made up his mind to its companionship, as if it had been an object supremely dear, stricken dumb and helpless, and turning all the future of tenderness into a shadow of the past. But he had also made up his mind that his life was not to be pauperised because he had had to renounce one sort of joy; rather, he had begun life again with a new counting-up of the treasures that remained to him, and he had even felt a release of power such as may come from ceasing to be afraid of your own neck.

And now, here he was pacing the shrubbery, angry with himself that the sense of irrevocableness in his lot, which ought in reason to have been as strong as ever, had been shaken by a change of circumstances that could make no change in relation to him. He told himself the truth quite roughly –

'She would never love me; and that is not the question – I could never approach her as a lover in her present position. I am exactly of no consequence at all, and am not likely to be of much consequence till my head is turning grey. But what has that to do with it? She would not have me on any terms, and I would not ask her. It is a meanness to be thinking about it now – no better than lurking about the battle-field to strip the dead; but there never was more gratuitous sinning. I have nothing to gain there – absolutely nothing … Then why can't I face the facts, and behave as they demand, instead of leaving my father to suppose that there are matters he can't speak to me about, though I might be useful in them?'

That last thought made one wave with the impulse that sent Rex walking firmly into the house and through the open door of the study, where he saw his father packing a travelling-desk.

'Can I be of any use, sir?' said Rex, with rallied courage, as his father looked up at him.

'Yes, my boy; when I am gone, just see to my letters, and answer where necessary, and send me word of everything. Dymock will manage the parish very well, and you will stay with your mother, or, at least, go up and down again, till I come back, whenever that may be.'

'You will hardly be very long, sir, I suppose,' said Rex, beginning to strap a railway rug. 'You will perhaps bring my cousin back to England?' He forced himself to speak of Gwendolen for the first time, and the Rector noticed the epoch with satisfaction.

'That depends,' he answered, taking the subject as a matter of course between them. 'Perhaps her mother may stay there with her, and I may come back very soon. This telegram leaves us in an ignorance which is rather anxious. But no doubt the arrangements of the will lately made are satisfactory, and there may possibly be an heir yet to be born. In any case, I feel confident that Gwendolen will be liberally – I should expect, splendidly – provided for.'

'It must have been a great shock for her,' said Rex, getting more resolute after the first twinge had been borne. 'I suppose he was a devoted husband.'

'No doubt of it,' said the Rector, in his most decided manner. 'Few men of his position would have come forward as he did under the circumstances.'

Rex had never seen Grandcourt, had never been spoken to about him by any one of the family, and knew nothing of Gwendolen's flight from her suitor to Leubronn. He only knew that Grandcourt, being very much in love with her, had made her an offer in the first weeks of her sudden poverty, and had behaved very handsomely in providing for her mother and sisters. That was all very natural, and what Rex himself would have liked to do. Grandcourt had been a lucky fellow, and had had some happiness before he got drowned. Yet Rex wondered much whether Gwendolen had been in love with the successful suitor, or had only forborne to tell him that she hated being made love to.

Chapter Fifty-Nine

I count myself in nothing else so happy
As in a soul remembering my good friends.

– SHAKESPEARE

Sir Hugo Mallinger was not so prompt in starting for Genoa as Mr Gascoigne had been, and Deronda on all accounts would not take his departure till he had seen the baronet. There was not only Grandcourt's death, but also the late crisis in his own life to make reasons why his oldest friend would desire to have the unrestrained communication of speech with him, for in writing he had not felt able to give any details concerning the mother who had come and gone like an apparition. It was not till the fifth evening that Deronda, according to telegram, waited for Sir Hugo at the station, where he was to arrive between eight and nine; and while he was looking forward to the sight of the kind, familiar face, which was part of his earliest memories, something like a smile, in spite of his late tragic experience, might have been detected in his eyes and the curve of his lips at the idea of Sir Hugo's pleasure in being now master of his estates, able to leave them to his daughters, or at least – according to a view of inheritance which had just been strongly impressed on Deronda's imagination – to take makeshift feminine offspring as intermediate to a satisfactory heir in a grandson. We should be churlish creatures if we could have no joy in our fellow-mortals' joy, unless it were in agreement with our theory of righteous distribution and our highest ideal of human good: what sour corners our mouths would get – our eyes, what frozen glances! and all the while our own possessions and desires would not exactly adjust themselves to our ideal. We must have some comradeship with imperfection; and it is, happily, possible to feel gratitude even where we discern a mistake that may have been injurious, the vehicle of the mistake being an affectionate intention prosecuted through a lifetime of kindly offices. Deronda's feeling and judgment were strongly against the action of Sir Hugo in making himself the agent of a falsity – yes, a falsity: he could give no milder name to the concealment under which he had been reared. But the baronet had probably had no clear knowledge concerning the mother's breach of trust, and with his light, easy way of taking life, had held it a reasonable preference in her that her son should be made an English gentleman, seeing that she had the eccentricity of not caring to part from her child, and be to him as if she were not. Daniel's affectionate gratitude towards Sir Hugo made him wish to find grounds of excuse rather than blame; for it is as possible to be rigid in principle and tender in blame, as it is to suffer from the sight of things hung awry, and yet to be patient with the hanger who sees amiss. If Sir Hugo in his bachelorhood had been beguiled into regarding children chiefly as a product intended to make life more agreeable to the full-grown, whose convenience alone was to be consulted in the disposal of them – why, he had shared an assumption which, if not formally avowed, was massively acted on at that date of the world's history; and Deronda, with all his keen memory of the painful inward struggle he had gone through in his boyhood, was able also to remember the many signs that his experience had been entirely shut out from Sir Hugo's conception. Ignorant kindness may have the effect of cruelty; but to be angry with it as if it were direct cruelty would be an ignorant *un*kindness, the most remote from Deronda's large imaginative lenience towards others. And perhaps now, after the searching scenes of the last ten days, in which the curtain had been lifted for him from the secrets of lives unlike his own, he was more than ever disposed to check that rashness of indignation or resentment which has an unpleasant likeness to the love of punishing. When he saw Sir Hugo's familiar figure descending from the railway carriage, the life-long affection, which had been well accustomed to make excuses, flowed in and submerged all newer knowledge that might have seemed fresh ground for blame.

'Well, Dan,' said Sir Hugo, with a serious fervour, grasping Deronda's hand. He uttered no other words of greeting; there was too strong a rush of mutual consciousness. The next thing was to give orders to the courier, and then to propose walking slowly in the mild evening, there being no hurry to get to the hotel.

'I have taken my journey easily, and am in excellent condition,' he said, as he and Deronda came out under the starlight, which was still faint with the lingering sheen of day. 'I didn't hurry in setting off, because I wanted to inquire into things a little, and so I got sight of your letter to Lady Mallinger before I started. But now, how is the widow?'

'Getting calmer,' said Deronda. 'She seems to be escaping the bodily illness that one might have feared for

her, after her plunge and terrible excitement. Her uncle and mother came two days ago, and she is being well taken care of.'

'Any prospect of an heir being born?'

'From what Mr Gascoigne said to me, I conclude not. He spoke as if it were a question whether the widow would have the estates for her life.'

'It will not be much of a wrench to her affections, I fancy, this loss of the husband?' said Sir Hugo, looking round at Deronda.

'The suddenness of the death has been a great blow to her,' said Deronda, quietly evading the question.

'I wonder whether Grandcourt gave her any notion what were the provisions of his will?' said Sir Hugo.

'Do you know what they are, sir?' parried Deronda.

'Yes, I do,' said the baronet, quickly. 'Gad! if there is no prospect of a legitimate heir, he has left everything to a boy he had by a Mrs Glasher; you know nothing about the affair, I suppose, but she was a sort of wife to him for a good many years, and there are three older children – girls. The boy is to take his father's name; he is Henleigh already, and he is to be Henleigh Mallinger Grandcourt. The Mallinger will be of no use to him, I am happy to say; but the young dog will have more than enough with his fourteen years' minority – no need to have had holes filled up with my fifty thousand for Diplow that he had no right to; and meanwhile my beauty, the young widow, is to put up with a poor two thousand a-year and the house at Gadsmere – a nice kind of banishment for her if she chose to shut herself up there, which I don't think she will. The boy's mother has been living there of late years. I'm perfectly disgusted with Grandcourt. I don't know that I'm obliged to think the better of him because he's drowned, though, so far as my affairs are concerned, nothing in his life became him like the leaving it.'

'In my opinion he did wrong when he married this wife – not in leaving his estates to the son,' said Deronda, rather drily.

'I say nothing against his leaving the land to the lad,' said Sir Hugo; 'but since he had married this girl he ought to have given her a handsome provision, such as she could live on in a style fitted to the rank he had raised her to. She ought to have had four or five thousand a-year and the London house for her life; that's what I should have done for her. I suppose, as she was penniless, her friends couldn't stand out for a settlement, else it's ill trusting to the will a man may make after he's married. Even a wise man generally lets some folly ooze out of him in his will – my father did, I know; and if a fellow has any spite or tyranny in him, he's likely to bottle off a good deal for keeping in that sort of document. It's quite clear Grandcourt meant that his death should put an extinguisher on his wife, if she bore him no heir.'

'And, in the other case, I suppose everything would have been reversed – illegitimacy would have had the extinguisher?' said Deronda, with some scorn.

'Precisely – Gadsmere and the two thousand. It's queer. One nuisance is that Grandcourt has made me an executor; but seeing he was the son of my only brother, I can't refuse to act. And I shall mind it less, if I can be of any use to the widow. Lush thinks she was not in ignorance about the family under the rose, and the purport of the will. He hints that there was no very good understanding between the couple. But I fancy you are the man who knew most about what Mrs Grandcourt felt or did not feel – eh, Dan?' Sir Hugo did not put this question with his usual jocoseness, but rather with a lowered tone of interested inquiry; and Deronda felt that any evasion would be misinterpreted. He answered gravely –

'She was certainly not happy. They were unsuited to each other. But as to the disposal of the property – from all I have seen of her, I should predict that she will be quite contented with it.'

'Then she is not much like the rest of her sex; that's all I can say,' said Sir Hugo, with a slight shrug. 'However, she ought to be something extraordinary, for there must be an entanglement between your horoscope and hers – eh? When that tremendous telegram came, the first thing Lady Mallinger said was, "How very strange that it should be Daniel who sends it!" But I have had something of the same sort in my own life. I was once at a foreign hotel where a lady had been left by her husband without money. When I heard of it, and came forward to help her, who should she be but an early flame of mine, who had been fool enough to marry an Austrian baron with a long moustache and short affection? But it was an affair of my own that called me there – nothing to do with knight-errantry, any more than your coming to Genoa had to do with the Grandcourts.'

There was silence for a little while. Sir Hugo had begun to talk of the Grandcourts as the less difficult subject between himself and Deronda; but they were both wishing to overcome a reluctance to perfect frankness on the events which touched their relation to each other. Deronda felt that his letter, after the first interview with his mother, had been rather a thickening than a breaking of the ice, and that he ought to wait for the first opening to come from Sir Hugo. Just when they were about to lose sight of the port, the baronet turned, and pausing as if to get a last view, said in a tone of more serious feeling –

'And about the main business of your coming to Genoa, Dan? You have not been deeply pained by anything

you have learned, I hope? There is nothing that you feel need change your position in any way? You know, whatever happens to you must always be of importance to me.'

'I desire to meet your goodness by perfect confidence, sir,' said Deronda. 'But I can't answer those questions truly by a simple yes or no. Much that I have heard about the past has pained me. And it has been a pain to meet and part with my mother in her suffering state, as I have been compelled to do. But it is no pain – it is rather a clearing up of doubts for which I am thankful, to know my parentage. As to the effect on my position, there will be no change in my gratitude to you, sir, for the fatherly care and affection you have always shown me. But to know that I was born a Jew, may have a momentous influence on my life, which I am hardly able to tell you of at present.'

Deronda spoke the last sentence with a resolve that overcame some diffidence. He felt that the differences between Sir Hugo's nature and his own would have, by-and-by, to disclose themselves more markedly than had ever yet been needful. The baronet gave him a quick glance, and turned to walk on. After a few moments' silence, in which he had reviewed all the material in his memory which would enable him to interpret Deronda's words, he said –

'I have long expected something remarkable from you, Dan; but, for God's sake, don't go into any eccentricities! I can tolerate any man's difference of opinion, but let him tell it me without getting himself up as a lunatic. At this stage of the world, if a man wants to be taken seriously he must keep clear of melodrama. Don't misunderstand me. I am not suspecting you of setting up any lunacy on your own account. I only think you might easily be led arm in arm with a lunatic, especially if he wanted defending. You have a passion for people who are pelted, Dan. I'm sorry for them too; but so far as company goes, it's a bad ground of selection. However, I don't ask you to anticipate your inclination in anything you have to tell me. When you make up your mind to a course that requires money, I have some sixteen thousand pounds that have been accumulating for you over and above what you have been having the interest of as income. And now I am come, I suppose you want to get back to England as soon as you can?'

'I must go first to Mainz to get away a chest of my grandfather's, and perhaps to see a friend of his,' said Deronda. 'Although the chest has been lying there these twenty years, I have an unreasonable sort of nervous eagerness to get it away under my care, as if it were more likely now than before that something might happen to it. And perhaps I am the more uneasy, because I lingered after my mother left, instead of setting out immediately. Yet I can't regret that I was here – else Mrs Grandcourt would have had none but servants to act for her.'

'Yes, yes,' said Sir Hugo, with a flippancy which was an escape of some vexation hidden under his more serious speech; 'I hope you are not going to set a dead Jew above a living Christian.'

Deronda coloured, and repressed a retort. They were just turning into the *Italia*.

Chapter Sixty

> But I shall say no more of this at this time; for this is to be felt and not to be talked of; and they who never touched it with their fingers may secretly perhaps laugh at it in their hearts and be never the wiser.
>
> – JEREMY TAYLOR

> The Roman Emperor in the legend put to death ten learned Israelites to avenge the sale of Joseph by his brethren. And there have always been enough of his kidney, whose piety lies in punishing, who can see the justice of grudges but not of gratitude. For you shall never convince the stronger feeling that it hath not the stronger reason, or incline him who hath no love to believe that there is good ground for loving. As we may learn from the order of word-making, wherein *love* precedeth *lovable.*

When Deronda presented his letter at the banking-house in the *Schuster Strasse* at Mainz, and asked for Joseph Kalonymos, he was presently shown into an inner room where, seated at a table arranging open letters, was the white-bearded man whom he had seen the year before in the synagogue at Frankfort. He wore his hat – it seemed to be the same old felt hat as before – and near him was a packed portmanteau with a wrap and overcoat upon it. On seeing Deronda enter he rose, but did not advance or put out his hand. Looking at him with small penetrating eyes which glittered like black gems in the midst of his yellowish face and white hair, he said in German –

'Good! It is now you who seek me, young man.'

'Yes; I seek you with gratitude, as a friend of my grandfather's,' said Deronda, 'and I am under an obligation to you for giving yourself much trouble on my account.' He spoke without difficulty in that liberal German tongue which takes many strange accents to its maternal bosom.

Kalonymos now put out his hand and said cordially, 'So – you are no longer angry at being something more than an Englishman?'

'On the contrary. I thank you heartily for helping to save me from remaining in ignorance of my parentage, and for taking care of the chest that my grandfather left in trust for me.'

'Sit down, sit down,' said Kalonymos, in a quick under-tone, seating himself again, and pointing to a chair near him. Then deliberately laying aside his hat and showing a head thickly covered with white hair, he stroked and clutched his beard while he looked examiningly at the young face before him. The moment wrought strongly on Deronda's imaginative susceptibility: in the presence of one linked still in zealous friendship with the grandfather whose hope had yearned towards him when he was unborn, and who though dead was yet to speak with him in those written memorials which, says Milton, 'contain a potency of life in them to be as active as that soul whose progeny they are,' he seemed to himself to be touching the electric chain of his own ancestry; and he bore the scrutinising look of Kalonymos with a delighted awe, something like what one feels in the solemn commemoration of acts done long ago but still telling markedly on the life of to-day. Impossible for men of duller fibre – men whose affection is not ready to diffuse itself through the wide travel of imagination, to comprehend, perhaps even to credit this sensibility of Deronda's; but it subsisted, like their own dulness, notwithstanding their lack of belief in it – and it gave his face an expression which seemed very satisfactory to the observer.

He said in Hebrew, quoting from one of the fine hymns in the Hebrew liturgy, 'As thy goodness has been great to the former generations, even so may it be to the latter.' Then after pausing a little he began, 'Young man, I rejoice that I was not yet set off again on my travels, and that you are come in time for me to see the image of my friend as he was in his youth – no longer perverted from the fellowship of your people – no longer shrinking in proud wrath from the touch of him who seemed to be claiming you as a Jew. You come with thankfulness yourself to claim the kindred and heritage that wicked contrivance would have robbed you of. You come with a willing soul to declare, "I am the grandson of Daniel Charisi." Is it not so?'

'Assuredly it is,' said Deronda. 'But let me say that I should at no time have been inclined to treat a Jew with incivility simply because he was a Jew. You can understand that I shrank from saying to a stranger, "I know nothing of my mother." '

'A sin, a sin!' said Kalonymos, putting up his hand and closing his eyes in disgust. 'A robbery of our people – as when our youths and maidens were reared for the Roman Edom. But it is frustrated. I have frustrated it. When Daniel Charisi – may his Rock and his Redeemer guard him! – when Daniel Charisi was a stripling and I

was a lad little above his shoulder, we made a solemn vow always to be friends. He said, “Let us bind ourselves with duty, as if we were sons of the same mother.” That was his bent from first to last – as he said, to fortify his soul with bonds. It was a saying of his, “Let us bind love with duty; for duty is the love of law; and law is the nature of the Eternal.” So we bound ourselves. And though we were much apart in our later life, the bond has never been broken. When he was dead, they sought to rob him; but they could not rob him of me. I rescued that remainder of him which he had prized and preserved for his offspring. And I have restored to him the offspring they had robbed him of. I will bring you the chest forthwith.’

Kalonymos left the room for a few minutes, and returned with a clerk who carried the chest, set it down on the floor, drew off a leather cover, and went out again. It was not very large, but was made heavy by ornamental bracers and handles of gilt iron. The wood was beautifully incised with Arabic lettering.

‘So!’ said Kalonymos, returning to his seat. ‘And here is the curious key,’ he added, taking it from a small leathern bag. ‘Bestow it carefully. I trust you are methodic and wary.’ He gave Deronda the monitory and slightly suspicious look with which age is apt to commit any object to the keeping of youth.

‘I shall be more careful of this than of any other property,’ said Deronda, smiling and putting the key in his breast-pocket. ‘I never before possessed anything that was a sign to me of so much cherished hope and effort. And I shall never forget that the effort was partly yours. Have you time to tell me more of my grandfather? Or shall I be trespassing in staying longer?’

‘Stay yet a while. In an hour and eighteen minutes I start for Trieste,’ said Kalonymos, looking at his watch, ‘and presently my sons will expect my attention. Will you let me make you known to them, so that they may have the pleasure of showing hospitality to my friend’s grandson? They dwell here in ease and luxury, though I choose to be a wanderer.’

‘I shall be glad if you will commend me to their acquaintance for some future opportunity,’ said Deronda. ‘There are pressing claims calling me to England – friends who may be much in need of my presence. I have been kept away from them too long by unexpected circumstances. But to know more of you and your family would be motive enough to bring me again to Mainz.’

‘Good! Me you will hardly find, for I am beyond my threescore years and ten, and I am a wanderer, carrying my shroud with me. But my sons and their children dwell here in wealth and unity. The days are changed for us in Mainz since our people were slaughtered wholesale if they wouldn’t be baptised wholesale: they are changed for us since Karl the Great fetched my ancestors from Italy to bring some tincture of knowledge to our rough German brethren. I and my contemporaries have had to fight for it too. Our youth fell on evil days; but this we have won: we increase our wealth in safety, and the learning of all Germany is fed and fattened by Jewish brains – though they keep not always their Jewish hearts. Have you been left altogether ignorant of your people’s life, young man?’

‘No,’ said Deronda, ‘I have lately, before I had any true suspicion of my parentage, been led to study everything belonging to their history with more interest than any other subject. It turns out that I have been making myself ready to understand my grandfather a little.’ He was anxious lest the time should be consumed before this circuitous course of talk could lead them back to the topic he most cared about. Age does not easily distinguish between what it needs to express and what youth needs to know – distance seeming to level the objects of memory; and keenly active as Joseph Kalonymos showed himself, an inkstand in the wrong place would have hindered his imagination from getting to Beyrout: he had been used to unite restless travel with punctilious observation. But Deronda’s last sentence answered its purpose.

‘So – you would perhaps have been such a man as he if your education had not hindered; for you are like him in features: – yet not altogether, young man. He had an iron will in his face: it braced up everybody about him. When he was quite young he had already got one deep upright line in his brow. I see none of that in you. Daniel Charisi used to say, “Better a wrong will than a wavering; better a steadfast enemy than an uncertain friend; better a false belief than no belief at all.” What he despised most was indifference. He had longer reasons than I can give you.’

‘Yet his knowledge was not narrow?’ said Deronda, with a tacit reference to the usual excuse for indecision – that it comes from knowing too much.

‘Narrow? no,’ said Kalonymos, shaking his head with a compassionate smile. ‘From his childhood upward, he drank in learning as easily as the plant sucks up water. But he early took to medicine and theories about life and health. He travelled to many countries, and spent much of his substance in seeing and knowing. What he used to insist on was that the strength and wealth of mankind depended on the balance of separateness and communication, and he was bitterly against our people losing themselves among the Gentiles; “It’s no better,” said he, “than the many sorts of grain going back from their variety into sameness.” He mingled all sorts of learning; and in that he was like our Arabic writers in the golden time. We studied together, but he went beyond me. Though we were bosom friends, and he poured himself out to me, we were as different as the inside and the outside of the bowl. I stood up for no notions of my own: I took Charisi’s sayings as I took the

shape of the trees: they were there, not to be disputed about. It came to the same thing in both of us: we were both faithful Jews, thankful not to be Gentiles. And since I was a ripe man, I have been what I am now, for all but age – loving to wander, loving transactions, loving to behold all things, and caring nothing about hardship. Charisi thought continually of our people's future: he went with all his soul into that part of our religion: I, not. So we have freedom, I am content. Our people wandered before they were driven. Young man, when I am in the East, I lie much on deck and watch the greater stars. The sight of them satisfies me. I know them as they rise, and hunger not to know more. Charisi was satisfied with no sight, but pieced it out with what had been before and what would come after. Yet we loved each other, and as he said, we bound our love with duty; we solemnly pledged ourselves to help and defend each other to the last. I have fulfilled my pledge.' Here Kalonymos rose, and Deronda, rising also, said –

'And in being faithful to him you have caused justice to be done to me. It would have been a robbery of me too that I should never have known of the inheritance he had prepared for me. I thank you with my whole soul.'

'Be worthy of him, young man. What is your vocation?' This question was put with a quick abruptness which embarrassed Deronda, who did not feel it quite honest to allege his law-reading as a vocation. He answered –

'I cannot say that I have any.'

'Get one, get one. The Jew must be diligent. You will call yourself a Jew and profess the faith of your fathers?' said Kalonymos, putting his hand on Deronda's shoulder and looking sharply in his face.

'I shall call myself a Jew,' said Deronda, deliberately, becoming slightly paler under the piercing eyes of his questioner. 'But I will not say that I shall profess to believe exactly as my fathers have believed. Our fathers themselves changed the horizon of their belief and learned of other races. But I think I can maintain my grandfather's notion of separateness with communication. I hold that my first duty is to my own people, and if there is anything to be done towards restoring or perfecting their common life, I shall make that my vocation.'

It happened to Deronda at that moment, as it has often happened to others, that the need for speech made an epoch in resolve. His respect for the questioner would not let him decline to answer, and by the necessity to answer he found out the truth for himself.

'Ah, you argue and you look forward – you are Daniel Charisi's grandson,' said Kalonymos, adding a benediction in Hebrew.

With that they parted; and almost as soon as Deronda was in London, the aged man was again on shipboard, greeting the friendly stars without any eager curiosity.

Chapter Sixty-One

Within the gentle heart Love shelters him,
  As birds within the green shade of the grove.
Before the gentle heart, in Nature's scheme,
  Love was not, nor the gentle heart ere Love.

– GUIDO GUINICELLI *(Rossetti's Translation)*

There was another house besides the white house at Pennicote, another breast besides Rex Gascoigne's, in which the news of Grandcourt's death caused both strong agitation and the effort to repress it.

It was Hans Meyrick's habit to send or bring in the 'Times' for his mother's reading. She was a great reader of news, from the widest-reaching politics to the list of marriages; the latter, she said, giving her the pleasant sense of finishing the fashionable novels without having read them, and seeing the heroes and heroines happy without knowing what poor creatures they were. On a Wednesday, there were reasons why Hans always chose to bring the paper, and to do so about the time that Mirah had nearly ended giving Mab her weekly lesson, avowing that he came then because he wanted to hear Mirah sing. But on the particular Wednesday now in question, after entering the house as quietly as usual with his latch-key, he appeared in the parlour, shaking the 'Times' aloft with a crackling noise, in remorseless interruption of Mab's attempt to render *Lascia ch'io pianga* with a remote imitation of her teacher. Piano and song ceased immediately: Mirah, who had been playing the accompaniment, involuntarily started up and turned round, the crackling sound, after the occasional trick of sounds, having seemed to her something thunderous; and Mab said –

'O-o-o, Hans! why do you bring a more horrible noise than my singing?'

'What on earth is the wonderful news?' said Mrs Meyrick, who was the only other person in the room. 'Anything about Italy – anything about the Austrians giving up Venice?'

'Nothing about Italy, but something from Italy,' said Hans, with a peculiarity in his tone and manner which set his mother interpreting. Imagine how some of us feel and behave when an event, not disagreeable, seems to be confirming and carrying out our private constructions. We say, 'What do you think?' in a pregnant tone to some innocent person who has not embarked his wisdom in the same boat with ours, and finds our information flat.

'Nothing bad?' said Mrs Meyrick, anxiously, thinking immediately of Deronda; and Mirah's heart had been already clutched by the same thought.

'Not bad for anybody we care much about,' said Hans, quickly; 'rather uncommonly lucky, I think. I never knew anybody die conveniently before. Considering what a dear gazelle I am, I am constantly wondering to find myself alive.'

'Oh me, Hans!' said Mab, impatiently, 'if you must talk of yourself, let it be behind your own back. What *is* it that has happened?'

'Duke Alfonso is drowned, and the Duchess is alive, that's all,' said Hans, putting the paper before Mrs Meyrick, with his finger against a paragraph. 'But more than all is – Deronda was at Genoa in the same hotel with them, and he saw her brought in by the fishermen, who had got her out of the water time enough to save her from any harm. It seems they saw her jump in after her husband – which was a less judicious action than I should have expected of the Duchess. However, Deronda is a lucky fellow in being there to take care of her.'

Mirah had sunk on the music-stool again, with her eyelids down and her hands tightly clasped; and Mrs Meyrick, giving up the paper to Mab, said –

'Poor thing! she must have been fond of her husband, to jump in after him.'

'It was an inadvertence – a little absence of mind,' said Hans, creasing his face roguishly, and throwing himself into a chair not far from Mirah. 'Who can be fond of a jealous baritone, with freezing glances, always singing asides? – that was the husband's *rôle,* depend upon it. Nothing can be neater than his getting drowned. The Duchess is at liberty now to marry a man with a fine head of hair, and glances that will melt instead of freezing her. And I shall be invited to the wedding.'

Here Mirah started from her sitting posture, and fixing her eyes on Hans with an angry gleam in them, she said, in the deeply-shaken voice of indignation –

‘Mr Hans, you ought not to speak in that way. Mr Deronda would not like you to speak so. Why will you say he is lucky – why will you use words of that sort about life and death – when what is life to one is death to another? How do you know it would be lucky if he loved Mrs Grandcourt? It might be a great evil to him. She would take him away from my brother – I know she would. Mr Deronda would not call that lucky – to pierce my brother’s heart.’

All three were struck with the sudden transformation. Mirah’s face, with a look of anger that might have suited Ithuriel, pale even to the lips that were usually so rich of tint, was not far from poor Hans, who sat transfixed, blushing under it as if he had been the girl, while he said nervously –

‘I am a fool and a brute, and I withdraw every word. I’ll go and hang myself like Judas – if it’s allowable to mention him.’ Even in Hans’s sorrowful moments, his improvised words had inevitably some drollery.

But Mirah’s anger was not appeased: how could it be? She had burst into indignant speech as creatures in intense pain bite and make their teeth meet even through their own flesh, by way of making their agony bearable. She said no more, but, seating herself at the piano, pressed the sheet of music before her, as if she thought of beginning to play again.

It was Mab who spoke, while Mrs Meyrick’s face seemed to reflect some of Hans’s discomfort.

‘Mirah is quite right to scold you, Hans. You are always taking Mr Deronda’s name in vain. And it is horrible, joking in that way about his marrying Mrs Grandcourt. Men’s minds must be very black, I think,’ ended Mab, with much scorn.

‘Quite true, my dear,’ said Hans, in a low tone, rising and turning on his heel to walk towards the back window.

‘We had better go on, Mab; you have not given your full time to the lesson,’ said Mirah, in a higher tone than usual. ‘Will you sing this again, or shall I sing it to you?’

‘Oh, please sing it to me,’ said Mab, rejoiced to take no more notice of what had happened.

And Mirah immediately sang *Lascia ch’io pianga,* giving forth its melodious sobs and cries with new fulness and energy. Hans paused in his walk and leaned against the mantelpiece, keeping his eyes carefully away from his mother’s. When Mirah had sung her last note and touched the last chord, she rose and said, ‘I must go home now. Ezra expects me.’

She gave her hand silently to Mrs Meyrick and hung back a little, not daring to look at her, instead of kissing her as usual. But the little mother drew Mirah’s face down to hers, and said soothingly, ‘God bless you, my dear.’ Mirah felt that she had committed an offence against Mrs Meyrick by angrily rebuking Hans, and mixed with the rest of her suffering was the sense that she had shown something like a proud ingratitude, an unbecoming assertion of superiority. And her friend had divined this compunction.

Meanwhile Hans had seized his wide-awake, and was ready to open the door.

‘Now, Hans,’ said Mab, with what was really a sister’s tenderness cunningly disguised, ‘you are not going to walk home with Mirah. I am sure she would rather not. You are so dreadfully disagreeable today.’

‘I shall go to take care of her, if she does not forbid me,’ said Hans, opening the door.

Mirah said nothing, and when he had opened the outer door for her and closed it behind him, he walked by her side unforbidden. She had not the courage to begin speaking to him again – conscious that she had perhaps been unbecomingly severe in her words to him, yet finding only severer words behind them in her heart. Besides, she was pressed upon by a crowd of thoughts thrusting themselves forward as interpreters of that consciousness which still remained unuttered to herself.

Hans, on his side, had a mind equally busy. Mirah’s anger had waked in him a new perception, and with it the unpleasant sense that he was a dolt not to have had it before. Suppose Mirah’s heart were entirely preoccupied with Deronda in another character than that of her own and her brother’s benefactor: the supposition was attended in Hans’s mind with anxieties which, to do him justice, were not altogether selfish. He had a strong persuasion, which only direct evidence to the contrary could have dissipated, that there was a serious attachment between Deronda and Mrs Grandcourt; he had pieced together many fragments of observation and gradually gathered knowledge, completed by what his sisters had heard from Anna Gascoigne, which convinced him not only that Mrs Grandcourt had a passion for Deronda, but also, notwithstanding his friend’s austere self-repression, that Deronda’s susceptibility about her was the sign of concealed love. Some men, having such a conviction, would have avoided allusions that could have roused that susceptibility; but Hans’s talk naturally fluttered towards mischief, and he was given to a form of experiment on live animals which consisted in irritating his friends playfully. His experiments had ended in satisfying him that what he thought likely was true.

On the other hand, any susceptibility Deronda had manifested about a lover’s attentions being shown to Mirah, Hans took to be sufficiently accounted for by the alleged reason, namely, her dependent position; for he credited his friend with all possible unselfish anxiety for those whom he could rescue or protect. And Deronda’s insistence that Mirah would never marry one who was not a Jew necessarily seemed to exclude

himself, since Hans shared the ordinary opinion, which he knew nothing to disturb, that Deronda was the son of Sir Hugo Mallinger.

Thus he felt himself in clearness about the state of Deronda's affections; but now, the events which really struck him as concurring towards the desirable union with Mrs Grandcourt, had called forth a flash of revelation from Mirah – a betrayal of her passionate feeling on this subject which made him melancholy on her account as well as his own – yet on the whole less melancholy than if he had imagined Deronda's hopes fixed on her. It is not sublime, but it is common, for a man to see the beloved object unhappy because his rival loves another, with more fortitude and a milder jealousy than if he saw her entirely happy in his rival. At least it was so with the mercurial Hans, who fluctuated between the contradictory states, of feeling wounded because Mirah was wounded, and of being almost obliged to Deronda for loving somebody else. It was impossible for him to give Mirah any direct sign of the way in which he had understood her anger, yet he longed that his speechless companionship should be eloquent in a tender, penitent sympathy which is an admissible form of wooing a bruised heart.

Thus the two went side by side in a companionship that yet seemed an agitated communication, like that of two chords whose quick vibrations lie outside our hearing. But when they reached the door of Mirah's home, and Hans said 'Good-bye,' putting out his hand with an appealing look of penitence, she met the look with melancholy gentleness, and said, 'Will you not come in and see my brother?'

Hans could not but interpret this invitation as a sign of pardon. He had not enough understanding of what Mirah's nature had been wrought into by her early experience, to divine how the very strength of her late excitement had made it pass the more quickly into a resolute acceptance of pain. When he had said, 'If you will let me,' and they went in together, half his grief was gone, and he was spinning a little romance of how his devotion might make him indispensable to Mirah in proportion as Deronda gave his devotion elsewhere. This was quite fair, since his friend was provided for according to his own heart; and on the question of Judaism Hans felt thoroughly fortified: – who ever heard in tale or history that a woman's love went in the track of her race and religion? Moslem and Jewish damsels were always attracted towards Christians, and now if Mirah's heart had gone forth too precipitately towards Deronda, here was another case in point. Hans was wont to make merry with his own arguments, to call himself a Giaour, and antithesis the sole clue to events; but he believed a little in what he laughed at. And thus his bird-like hope, constructed on the lightest principles, soared again in spite of heavy circumstance.

They found Mordecai looking singularly happy, holding a closed letter in his hand, his eyes glowing with a quiet triumph which in his emaciated face gave the idea of a conquest over assailing death. After the greeting between him and Hans, Mirah put her arm round her brother's neck and looked down at the letter in his hand, without the courage to ask about it, though she felt sure that it was the cause of his happiness.

'A letter from Daniel Deronda,' said Mordecai, answering her look. 'Brief – only saying that he hopes soon to return. Unexpected claims have detained him. The promise of seeing him again is like the bow in the cloud to me,' continued Mordecai, looking at Hans; 'and to you also it must be a gladness. For who has two friends like him?'

While Hans was answering Mirah slipped away to her own room; but not to indulge in any outburst of the passion within her. If the angels once supposed to watch the toilet of women had entered the little chamber with her and let her shut the door behind them, they would only have seen her take off her hat, sit down and press her hands against her temples as if she had suddenly reflected that her head ached; then rise to dash cold water on her eyes and brow and hair till her backward curls were full of crystal beads, while she had dried her brow and looked out like a freshly-opened flower from among the dewy tresses of the woodland; then give deep sighs of relief, and putting on her little slippers, sit still after that action for a couple of minutes, which seemed to her so long, so full of things to come, that she rose with an air of recollection, and went down to make tea.

Something of the old life had returned. She had been used to remember that she must learn her part, must go to rehearsal, must act and sing in the evening, must hide her feelings from her father; and the more painful her life grew, the more she had been used to hide. The force of her nature had long found its chief action in resolute endurance, and to-day the violence of feeling which had caused the first jet of anger had quickly transformed itself into a steady facing of trouble, the well-known companion of her young years. But while she moved about and spoke as usual, a close observer might have discerned a difference between this apparent calm, which was the effect of restraining energy, and the sweet genuine calm of the months when she first felt a return of her infantine happiness.

Those who have been indulged by fortune and have always thought of calamity as what happens to others, feel a blind incredulous rage at the reversal of their lot, and half believe that their wild cries will alter the course of the storm. Mirah felt no such surprise when familiar Sorrow came back from brief absence, and sat down with her according to the old use and wont. And this habit of expecting trouble rather than joy,

hindered her from having any persistent belief in opposition to the probabilities which were not merely suggested by Hans but were supported by her own private knowledge and long-growing presentiment. An attachment between Deronda and Mrs Grandcourt, to end in their future marriage, had the aspect of a certainty for her feeling. There had been no fault in him: facts had ordered themselves so that there was a tie between him and this woman who belonged to another world than her own and Ezra's – nay, who seemed another sort of being than Deronda, something foreign that would be a disturbance in his life instead of blending with it. Well, well – but if it could have been deferred so as to make no difference while Ezra was there! She did not know all the momentousness of the relation between Deronda and her brother, but she had seen, and instinctively felt enough to forebode its being incongruous with any close tie to Mrs Grandcourt; at least this was the clothing that Mirah first gave to her mortal repugnance. But in the still, quick action of her consciousness, thoughts went on like changing states of sensation unbroken by her habitual acts; and this inward language soon said distinctly that the mortal repugnance would remain even if Ezra were secured from loss.

'What I have read about and sung about and seen acted, is happening to me – this that I am feeling is the love that makes jealousy:' – so impartially Mirah summed up the charge against herself. But what difference could this pain of hers make to any one else? It must remain as exclusively her own, and hidden, as her early yearning and devotion towards her lost mother. But unlike that devotion, it was something that she felt to be a misfortune of her nature – a discovery that what should have been pure gratitude and reverence had sunk into selfish pain, that the feeling she had hitherto delighted to pour out in words was degraded into something she was ashamed to betray – an absurd longing that she who had received all and given nothing should be of importance where she was of no importance – an angry feeling towards another woman who possessed the good she wanted. But what notion, what vain reliance could it be that had lain darkly within her and was now burning itself into sight as disappointment and jealousy? It was as if her soul had been steeped in poisonous passion by forgotten dreams of deep sleep, and now flamed out in this unaccountable misery. For with her waking reason she had never entertained what seemed the wildly unfitting thought that Deronda could love her. The uneasiness she had felt before had been comparatively vague and easily explained as part of a general regret that he was only a visitant in her and her brother's world, from which the world where his home lay was as different as a portico with lights and lacqueys was different from the door of a tent, where the only splendour came from the mysterious inaccessible stars. But her feeling was no longer vague: the cause of her pain – the image of Mrs Grandcourt by Deronda's side drawing him farther and farther into the distance, was as definite as pincers on her flesh. In the Psyche-mould of Mirah's frame there rested a fervid quality of emotion sometimes rashly supposed to require the bulk of a Cleopatra; her impressions had the thoroughness and tenacity that give to the first selection of passionate feeling the character of a life-long faithfulness. And now a selection had declared itself, which gave love a cruel heart of jealousy: she had been used to a strong repugnance towards certain objects that surrounded her, and to walk inwardly aloof from them while they touched her sense. And now her repugnance concentrated itself on Mrs Grandcourt, of whom she involuntarily conceived more evil than she knew. 'I could bear everything that used to be – but this is worse – this is worse, – I used not to have horrible feelings!' said the poor child in a loud whisper to her pillow. Strange, that she should have to pray against any feeling which concerned Deronda!

But this conclusion had been reached through an evening spent in attending to Mordecai, whose exaltation of spirit in the prospect of seeing his friend again, disposed him to utter many thoughts aloud to Mirah, though such communication was often interrupted by intervals apparently filled with an inward utterance that animated his eyes and gave an occasional silent action to his lips. One thought especially occupied him.

'Seest thou, Mirah,' he said once, after a long silence, 'the *Shemah,* wherein we briefly confess the divine Unity, is the chief devotional exercise of the Hebrew; and this made our religion the fundamental religion for the whole world; for the divine Unity embraced as its consequence the ultimate unity of mankind. See, then – the nation which has been scoffed at for its separateness, has given a binding theory to the human race. Now, in complete unity a part possesses the whole as the whole possesses every part: and in this way human life is tending toward the image of the Supreme Unity: for as our life becomes more spiritual by capacity of thought, and joy therein, possession tends to become more universal, being independent of gross material contact; so that in a brief day the soul of a man may know in fuller volume the good which has been and is, nay, is to come, than all he could possess in a whole life where he had to follow the creeping paths of the senses. In this moment, my sister, I hold the joy of another's future within me: a future which these eyes will not see, and which my spirit may not then recognise as mine. I recognise it now, and love it so, that I can lay down this poor life upon its altar and say: "Burn, burn indiscernibly into that which shall be, which is my love and not me." Dost thou understand, Mirah?'

'A little,' said Mirah, faintly, 'but my mind is too poor to have felt it.'

'And yet,' said Mordecai, rather insistently, 'women are specially framed for the love which feels possession

in renouncing, and is thus a fit image of what I mean. Somewhere in the later *Midrash*, I think, is the story of a Jewish maiden who loved a Gentile king so well, that this was what she did: – She entered into prison and changed clothes with the woman who was beloved by the king, that she might deliver that woman from death by dying in her stead, and leave the king to be happy in his love which was not for her. This is the surpassing love, that loses self in the object of love.'

'No, Ezra, no,' said Mirah, with low-toned intensity, 'that was not it. She wanted the king when she was dead to know what she had done, and feel that she was better than the other. It was her strong self, wanting to conquer, that made her die.'

Mordecai was silent a little, and then argued –

'That might be, Mirah. But if she acted so, believing the king would never know?'

'You can make the story so in your mind, Ezra, because you are great, and like to fancy the greatest that could be. But I think it was not really like that. The Jewish girl must have had jealousy in her heart, and she wanted somehow to have the first place in the king's mind. That is what she would die for.'

'My sister, thou hast read too many plays, where the writers delight in showing the human passions as indwelling demons, unmixed with the relenting and devout elements of the soul. Thou judgest by the plays, and not by thy own heart, which is like our mother's.'

Mirah made no answer.

Chapter Sixty-Two

Das Glück ist eine leichte Dirne,
Und weilt nicht gern am selben Ort;
Sie streicht das Haar dir von der Stirne
Und küsst dich rasch und flatten fort

Frau Unglück hat im Gegentheile
Dich liebefest an's Herz gedrückt;
Sie sagt, sie habe keine Eile,
Setzt sich zu dir ans Bett und strickt.

– HEINE[21]

Something which Mirah had lately been watching for as the fulfilment of a threat, seemed now the continued visit of that familiar sorrow which had lately come back, bringing abundant luggage.

Turning out of Knightsbridge, after singing at a charitable morning concert in a wealthy house, where she had been recommended by Klesmer, and where there had been the usual groups outside to see the departing company, she began to feel herself dogged by footsteps that kept an even pace with her own. Her concert dress being simple black, over which she had thrown a dust-cloak, could not make her an object of unpleasant attention, and render walking an imprudence; but this reflection did not occur to Mirah: another kind of alarm lay uppermost in her mind. She immediately thought of her father, and could no more look round than if she had felt herself tracked by a ghost. To turn and face him would be voluntarily to meet the rush of emotions which beforehand seemed intolerable. If it were her father, he must mean to claim recognition, and he would oblige her to face him. She must wait for that compulsion. She walked on, not quickening her pace – of what use was that? – but picturing what was about to happen as if she had the full certainty that the man behind her was her father; and along with her picturing went a regret that she had given her word to Mrs Meyrick not to use any concealment about him. The regret at last urged her, at least, to try and hinder any sudden betrayal that would cause her brother an unnecessary shock. Under the pressure of this motive, she resolved to turn before she reached her own door, and firmly will the encounter instead of merely submitting to it. She had already reached the entrance of the small square where her home lay, and had made up her mind to turn, when she felt her embodied presentiment getting closer to her, then slipping to her side, grasping her wrist, and saying, with a persuasive curl of accent, 'Mirah!'

She paused at once without any start; it was the voice she expected, and she was meeting the expected eyes. Her face was as grave as if she had been looking at her executioner, while his was adjusted to the intention of soothing and propitiating her. Once a handsome face, with bright colour, it was now sallow and deep-lined, and had that peculiar impress of impudent suavity which comes from courting favour while accepting disrespect. He was lightly made and active, with something of youth about him which made the signs of age seem a disguise; and in reality he was hardly fifty-seven. His dress was shabby, as when she had seen him before. The presence of this unreverend father now, more than ever, affected Mirah with the mingled anguish of shame and grief, repulsion and pity – more than ever, now that her own world was changed into one where there was no comradeship to fence him from scorn and contempt.

Slowly, with a sad, tremulous voice, she said, 'It is you, father.'

'Why did you run away from me, child?' he began, with rapid speech which was meant to have a tone of tender remonstrance, accompanied with various quick gestures like an abbreviated finger-language. 'What were you afraid of? You knew I never made you do anything against your will. It was for your sake I broke up your engagement in the Vorstadt, because I saw it didn't suit you, and you repaid me by leaving me to the bad times that came in consequence. I had made an easier engagement for you at the Vorstadt Theatre in Dresden: I didn't tell you, because I wanted to take you by surprise. And you left me planted there – obliged to make myself scarce because I had broken contract. That was hard lines for me, after I had given up everything for the sake of getting you an education which was to be a fortune to you. What father devoted himself to his daughter more than I did to you? You know how I bore that disappointment in your voice, and made the best of it; and when I had nobody besides you, and was getting broken, as a man must who has had to fight his way with his brains – you chose that time to leave me. Who else was it you owed everything to, if not to me?

and where was your feeling in return? For what my daughter cared, I might have died in a ditch.'

Lapidoth stopped short here, not from lack of invention, but because he had reached a pathetic climax, and gave a sudden sob, like a woman's, taking out hastily an old yellow silk handkerchief. He really felt that his daughter had treated him ill – a sort of sensibility which is naturally strong in unscrupulous persons, who put down what is owing to them, without any *per contra.* Mirah, in spite of that sob, had energy enough not to let him suppose that he deceived her. She answered more firmly, though it was the first time she had ever used accusing words to him.

'You know why I left you, father; and I had reason to distrust you, because I felt sure that you had deceived my mother. If I could have trusted you, I would have stayed with you and worked for you.'

'I never meant to deceive your mother, Mirah,' said Lapidoth, putting back his handkerchief, but beginning with a voice that seemed to struggle against further sobbing. 'I meant to take you back to her, but chances hindered me just at the time, and then there came information of her death. It was better for you that I should stay where I was, and your brother could take care of himself. Nobody had any claim on me but you. I had word of your mother's death from a particular friend, who had undertaken to manage things for me, and I sent him over money to pay expenses. There's one chance, to be sure' – Lapidoth had quickly conceived that he must guard against something unlikely, yet possible – 'he may have written me lies for the sake of getting the money out of me.'

Mirah made no answer; she could not bear to utter the only true one – 'I don't believe one word of what you say' – and she simply showed a wish that they should walk on, feeling that their standing still might draw down unpleasant notice. Even as they walked along, their companionship might well have made a passer-by turn back to look at them. The figure of Mirah, with her beauty set off by the quiet, careful dress of an English lady, made a strange pendant to this shabby, foreign-looking, eager, and gesticulating man, who withal had an ineffaceable jauntiness of air, perhaps due to the bushy curls of his grizzled hair, the smallness of his hands and feet, and his light walk.

'You seem to have done well for yourself, Mirah? *You* are in no want, I see,' said the father, looking at her with emphatic examination.

'Good friends who found me in distress have helped me to get work,' said Mirah, hardly knowing what she actually said, from being occupied with what she would presently have to say. 'I give lessons. I have sung in private houses. I have just been singing at a private concert.' She paused, and then added, with significance, 'I have very good friends, who know all about me.'

'And you would be ashamed they should see your father in this plight? No wonder. I came to England with no prospect, but the chance of finding you. It was a mad quest; but a father's heart is superstitious – feels a loadstone drawing it somewhere or other. I might have done very well, staying abroad: when I hadn't you to take care of, I could have rolled or settled as easily as a ball; but it's hard being lonely in the world, when your spirit's beginning to break. And I thought my little Mirah would repent leaving her father, when she came to look back. I've had a sharp pinch to work my way; I don't know what I shall come down to next. Talents like mine are no use in this country. When a man's getting out at elbows nobody will believe in him. I couldn't get any decent employ with my appearance. I've been obliged to go pretty low for a shilling already.'

Mirah's anxiety was quick enough to imagine her father's sinking into a further degradation, which she was bound to hinder if she could. But before she could answer his string of inventive sentences, delivered with as much glibness as if they had been learned by rote, he added promptly –

'Where do you live, Mirah?'

'Here, in this square. We are not far from the house.'

'In lodgings?'

'Yes.'

'Any one to take care of you?'

'Yes,' said Mirah again, looking full at the keen face which was turned towards hers – 'my brother.'

The father's eyelids fluttered as if the lightning had come across them, and there was a slight movement of the shoulders. But he said, after a just perceptible pause: 'Ezra? How did you know – how did you find him?'

'That would take long to tell. Here we are at the door. My brother would not wish me to close it on you.'

Mirah was already on the door-step, but had her face turned towards her father, who stood below her on the pavement. Her heart had begun to beat faster with the prospect of what was coming in the presence of Ezra; and already in this attitude of giving leave to the father whom she had been used to obey – in this sight of him standing below her, with a perceptible shrinking from the admission which he had been indirectly asking for, she had a pang of the peculiar, sympathetic humiliation and shame – the stabbed heart of reverence – which belongs to a nature intensely filial.

'Stay a minute, *Liebchen*,' said Lapidoth, speaking in a lowered tone; 'what sort of man has Ezra turned out?'

'A good man – a wonderful man,' said Mirah, with slow emphasis, trying to master the agitation which

made her voice more tremulous as she went on. She felt urged to prepare her father for the complete penetration of himself which awaited him. ‘But he was very poor when my friends found him for me – a poor workman. Once – twelve years ago – he was strong and happy, going to the East, which he loved to think of; and my mother called him back because – because she had lost me. And he went to her, and took care of her through great trouble, and worked for her till she died – died in grief. And Ezra, too, had lost his health and strength. The cold had seized him coming back to my mother, because she was forsaken. For years he has been getting weaker – always poor, always working – but full of knowledge, and great-minded. All who come near him honour him. To stand before him, is like standing before a prophet of God’ – Mirah ended with difficulty, her heart throbbing – ‘falsehoods are no use.’

She had cast down her eyes that she might not see her father while she spoke the last words – unable to bear the ignoble look of frustration that gathered in his face. But he was none the less quick in invention and decision.

‘Mirah, *Liebchen*,’ he said, in the old caressing way, ‘shouldn’t you like me to make myself a little more respectable before my son sees me? If I had a little sum of money, I could fit myself out and come home to you as your father ought, and then I could offer myself for some decent place. With a good shirt and coat on my back, people would be glad enough to have me. I could offer myself for a courier, if I didn’t look like a broken-down mountebank. I should like to be with my children, and forget and forgive. But you have never seen your father look like this before. If you had ten pounds at hand – or I could appoint you to bring it me somewhere – I could fit myself out by the day after to-morrow.’

Mirah felt herself under a temptation which she must try to overcome. She answered, obliging herself to look at him again –

‘I don’t like to deny you what you ask, father; but I have given a promise not to do things for you in secret. It *is* hard to see you looking needy; but we will bear that for a little while; and then you can have new clothes, and we can pay for them.’ Her practical sense made her see now what was Mrs Meyrick’s wisdom in exacting a promise from her.

Lapidoth’s good humour gave way a little. He said with a sneer, ‘You are a hard and fast young lady – you’ve been learning useful virtues – keeping promises not to help your father with a pound or two when you are getting money to dress yourself in silk – your father who made an idol of you, and gave up the best part of his life to providing for you.’

‘It seems cruel – I know it seems cruel,’ said Mirah, feeling this a worse moment than when she meant to drown herself. Her lips were suddenly pale. ‘But, father, it is more cruel to break the promises people trust in. That broke my mother’s heart – it has broken Ezra’s life. You and I must eat now this bitterness from what has been. Bear it. Bear to come in and be cared for as you are.’

‘To-morrow, then,’ said Lapidoth, almost turning on his heel away from this pale, trembling daughter, who seemed now to have got the inconvenient world to back her; but he quickly turned on it again, with his hands feeling about restlessly in his pockets, and said, with some return to his appealing tone, ‘I’m a little cut up with all this, Mirah. I shall get up my spirits by to-morrow. If you’ve a little money in your pocket, I suppose it isn’t against your promise to give me a trifle – to buy a cigar with.’

Mirah could not ask herself another question – could not do anything else than put her cold trembling hands in her pocket for her *portemonnaie* and hold it out. Lapidoth grasped it at once, pressed her fingers the while, said, ‘Good-bye, my little girl – to-morrow then!’ and left her. He had not taken many steps before he looked carefully into all the folds of the purse, found two half-sovereigns and odd silver, and, pasted against the folding cover, a bit of paper on which Ezra had inscribed, in a beautiful Hebrew character, the name of his mother, the days of her birth, marriage, and death, and the prayer, ‘May Mirah be delivered from evil.’ It was Mirah’s liking to have this little inscription on many articles that she used. The father read it, and had a quick vision of his marriage day, and the bright, unblamed young fellow he was in that time; teaching many things, but expecting by-and-by to get money more easily by writing; and very fond of his beautiful bride Sara – crying when she expected him to cry, and reflecting every phase of her feeling with mimetic susceptibility. Lapidoth had travelled a long way from that young self, and thought of all that this inscription signified with an unemotional memory, which was like the ocular perception of a touch to one who has lost the sense of touch, or like morsels on an untasting palate, having shape and grain, but no flavour. Among the things we may gamble away in a lazy selfish life is the capacity for ruth, compunction, or any unselfish regret – which we may come to long for as one in slow death longs to feel laceration, rather than be conscious of a widening margin where consciousness once was. Mirah’s purse was a handsome one – a gift to her, which she had been unable to reflect about giving away – and Lapidoth presently found himself outside of his reverie, considering what the purse would fetch in addition to the sum it contained, and what prospect there was of his being able to get more from his daughter without submitting to adopt a penitential form of life under the eyes of that formidable son. On such a subject his susceptibilities were still lively.

Meanwhile Mirah had entered the house with her power of reticence overcome by the cruelty of her pain. She found her brother quietly reading and sifting old manuscripts of his own, which he meant to consign to Deronda. In the reaction from the long effort to master herself, she fell down before him and clasped his knees, sobbing, and crying, 'Ezra, Ezra!'

He did not speak. His alarm for her was spending itself on conceiving the cause of her distress, the more striking from the novelty in her of this violent manifestation. But Mirah's own longing was to be able to speak and tell him the cause. Presently she raised her hand, and still sobbing, said brokenly –

'Ezra, my father! our father! He followed me. I wanted him to come in. I said you would let him come in. And he said No, he would not – not now, but to-morrow. And he begged for money from me. And I gave him my purse, and he went away.'

Mirah's words seemed to herself to express all the misery she felt in them. Her brother found them less grievous than his preconceptions, and said gently, 'Wait for calm, Mirah, and then tell me all,' – putting off her hat and laying his hands tenderly on her head. She felt the soothing influence, and in a few minutes told him as exactly as she could all that had happened.

'He will not come to-morrow,' said Mordecai. Neither of them said to the other what they both thought, namely, that he might watch for Mirah's outgoings and beg from her again.

'Seest thou,' he presently added, 'our lot is the lot of Israel. The grief and the glory are mingled as the smoke and the flame. It is because we children have inherited the good that we feel the evil. These things are wedded for us, as our father was wedded to our mother.'

The surroundings were of Brompton, but the voice might have come from a Rabbi transmitting the sentences of an elder time to be registered in *Babli* – by which (to our ears) affectionate-sounding diminutive is meant the voluminous Babylonian Talmud. 'The Omnipresent,' said a Rabbi, 'is occupied in making marriages.' The levity of the saying lies in the ear of him who hears it; for by marriages the speaker meant all the wondrous combinations of the universe whose issue makes our good and evil.

Chapter Sixty-Three

> Moses, trotz seiner Befeindung der Kunst, dennoch selber ein grosser Künstler war und den wahren Künstlergeist besass. Nur war dieser Künstlergeist bei ihm, wie bei seinen ägyptischen Landsleuten, nur auf das Colossale und Unverwüstliche gerichtet. Aber nicht wie die Aegypter formirte er seine Kunstwerke aus Backstein und Granit, sondern er baute Menschenpyramiden, er meisselte Menschen Obelisken, er nahm einen armen Hirtenstamm und Schuf daraus ein Volk, das ebenfalls den Jahrhunderten trotzen sollte … er Schuf Israel.
>
> – HEINE: *Geständnisse*[22]

Imagine the difference in Deronda's state of mind when he left England and when he returned to it. He had set out for Genoa in total uncertainty how far the actual bent of his wishes and affections would be encouraged – how far the claims revealed to him might draw him into new paths, far away from the tracks his thoughts had lately been pursuing with a consent of desire which uncertainty made dangerous. He came back with something like a discovered charter warranting the inherited right that his ambition had begun to yearn for: he came back with what was better than freedom – with a duteous bond which his experience had been preparing him to accept gladly, even if it had been attended with no promise of satisfying a secret passionate longing never yet allowed to grow into a hope. But now he dared avow to himself the hidden selection of his love. Since the hour when he left the house at Chelsea in full-hearted silence under the effect of Mirah's farewell look and words – their exquisite appealingness stirring in him that deeply-laid care for womanhood which had begun when his own lip was like a girl's – her hold on his feeling had helped him to be blameless in word and deed under the difficult circumstances we know of. There seemed no likelihood that he could ever woo this creature who had become dear to him amidst associations that forbade wooing; yet she had taken her place in his soul as a beloved type – reducing the power of other fascination and making a difference in it that became deficiency. The influence had been continually strengthened. It had lain in the course of poor Gwendolen's lot that her dependence on Deronda tended to rouse in him the enthusiasm of self-martyring pity rather than of personal love, and his less constrained tenderness flowed with the fuller stream towards an indwelling image in all things unlike Gwendolen. Still more, his relation to Mordecai had brought with it a new nearness to Mirah which was not the less agitating because there was no apparent change in his position towards her; and she had inevitably been bound up in all the thoughts that made him shrink from an issue disappointing to her brother. This process had not gone on unconsciously in Deronda: he was conscious of it as we are of some covetousness that it would be better to nullify by encouraging other thoughts than to give it the insistency of confession even to ourselves: but the jealous fire had leaped out at Hans's pretensions, and when his mother accused him of being in love with a Jewess, any evasion suddenly seemed an infidelity. His mother had compelled him to a decisive acknowledgment of his love, as Joseph Kalonymos had compelled him to a definite expression of his resolve. This new state of decision wrought on Deronda with a force which surprised even himself. There was a release of all the energy which had long been spent in self-checking and suppression because of doubtful conditions; and he was ready to laugh at his own impetuosity when, as he neared England on his way from Mainz, he felt the remaining distance more and more of an obstruction. It was as if he had found an added soul in finding his ancestry – his judgment no longer wandering in the mazes of impartial sympathy, but choosing, with that noble partiality which is man's best strength, the closer fellowship that makes sympathy practical – exchanging that bird's-eye reasonableness which soars to avoid preference and loses all sense of quality, for the generous reasonableness of drawing shoulder to shoulder with men of like inheritance. He wanted now to be again with Mordecai, to pour forth instead of restraining his feeling, to admit agreement and maintain dissent, and all the while to find Mirah's presence without the embarrassment of obviously seeking it, to see her in the light of a new possibility, to interpret her looks and words from a new starting-point. He was not greatly alarmed about the effect of Hans's attentions, but he had a presentiment that her feeling towards himself had from the first lain in a channel from which it was not likely to be diverted into love. To astonish a woman by turning into her lover when she has been thinking of you merely as a Lord Chancellor is what a man naturally shrinks from: he is anxious to create an easier transition.

What wonder that Deronda saw no other course than to go straight from the London railway station to the lodgings in that small square in Brompton? Every argument was in favour of his losing no time. He had

promised to run down the next day to see Lady Mallinger at the Abbey, and it was already sunset. He wished to deposit the precious chest with Mordecai, who would study its contents, both in his absence and in company with him; and that he should pay this visit without pause would gratify Mordecai's heart. Hence, and for other reasons, it gratified Deronda's heart. The strongest tendencies of his nature were rushing in one current – the fervent affectionateness which made him delight in meeting the wish of beings near to him, and the imaginative need of some far-reaching relation to make the horizon of his immediate, daily acts. It has to be admitted that in this classical, romantic, world-historic position of his, bringing as it were from its hiding-place his hereditary armour, he wore – but so, one must suppose, did the most ancient heroes whether Semitic or Japhetic – the summer costume of his contemporaries. He did not reflect that the drab tints were becoming to him, for he rarely went to the expense of such thinking; but his own depth of colouring, which made the becomingness, got an added radiance in the eyes, a fleeting and returning glow in the skin, as he entered the house, wondering what exactly he should find. He made his entrance as noiseless as possible.

It was the evening of that same afternoon on which Mirah had had the interview with her father. Mordecai, penetrated by her grief, and also by the sad memories which the incident had awakened, had not resumed his task of sifting papers: some of them had fallen scattered on the floor in the first moments of anxiety, and neither he nor Mirah had thought of laying them in order again. They had sat perfectly still together, not knowing how long; while the clock ticked on the mantelpiece, and the light was fading. Mirah, unable to think of the food that she ought to have been taking, had not moved since she had thrown off her dust-cloak and sat down beside Mordecai with her hand in his, while he had laid his head backward, with closed eyes and difficult breathing, looking, Mirah thought, as he would look when the soul within him could no longer live in its straitened home. The thought that his death might be near was continually visiting her when she saw his face in this way, without its vivid animation; and now, to the rest of her grief was added the regret that she had been unable to control the violent outburst which had shaken him. She sat watching him – her oval cheeks pallid, her eyes with the sorrowful brilliancy left by young tears, her curls in as much disorder as a just-wakened child's – watching that emaciated face, where it might have been imagined that a veil had been drawn never to be lifted, as if it were her dead joy which had left her strong enough to live on in sorrow. And life at that moment stretched before Mirah with more than a repetition of former sadness. The shadow of the father was there, and more than that, a double bereavement – of one living as well as one dead.

But now the door was opened, and while none entered, a well-known voice said: 'Daniel Deronda – may he come in?'

'Come! come!' said Mordecai, immediately rising with an irradiated face and opened eyes – apparently as little surprised as if he had seen Deronda in the morning, and expected this evening visit; while Mirah started up blushing with confused, half-alarmed expectation.

Yet when Deronda entered, the sight of him was like the clearness after rain: no clouds to come could hinder the cherishing beam of that moment. As he held out his right hand to Mirah, who was close to her brother's left, he laid his other hand on Mordecai's right shoulder, and stood so a moment, holding them both at once, uttering no word, but reading their faces, till he said anxiously to Mirah, 'Has anything happened? – any trouble?'

'Talk not of trouble now,' said Mordecai, saving her from the need to answer. 'There is joy in your face – let the joy be ours.'

Mirah thought, 'It is for something he cannot tell us.' But they all sat down, Deronda drawing a chair close in front of Mordecai.

'That is true,' he said, emphatically. 'I have a joy which will remain to us even in the worst trouble. I did not tell you the reason of my journey abroad, Mordecai, because – never mind – I went to learn my parentage. And you were right. I am a Jew.'

The two men clasped hands with a movement that seemed part of the flash from Mordecai's eyes, and passed through Mirah like an electric shock. But Deronda went on without pause, speaking from Mordecai's mind as much as from his own –

'We have the same people. Our souls have the same vocation. We shall not be separated by life or by death.'

Mordecai's answer was uttered in Hebrew, and in no more than a loud whisper. It was in the liturgical words which express the religious bond: 'Our God, and the God of our fathers.'

The weight of feeling pressed too strongly on that ready-winged speech which usually moved in quick adaptation to every stirring of his fervour.

Mirah fell on her knees by her brother's side, and looked at his now illuminated face, which had just before been so deathly. The action was an inevitable outlet of the violent reversal from despondency to a gladness which came over her as solemnly as if she had been beholding a religious rite. For the moment she thought of the effect on her own life only through the effect on her brother.

'And it is not only that I am a Jew,' Deronda went on, enjoying one of those rare moments when our

yearnings and our acts can be completely one, and the real we behold is our ideal good; 'but I come of a strain that has ardently maintained the fellowship of our race – a line of Spanish Jews that has borne many students and men of practical power. And I possess what will give us a sort of communion with them. My grandfather Daniel Charisi, preserved manuscripts, family records stretching far back, in the hope that they would pass into the hands of his grandson. And now his hope is fulfilled, in spite of attempts to thwart it by hiding my parentage from me. I possess the chest containing them, with his own papers, and it is down below in this house. I mean to leave it with you, Mordecai, that you may help me to study the manuscripts. Some of them I can read easily enough – those in Spanish and Italian. Others are in Hebrew, and, I think, Arabic; but there seem to be Latin translations. I was only able to look at them cursorily while I stayed at Mainz. We will study them together.'

Deronda ended with that bright smile which, beaming out from the habitual gravity of his face, seemed a revelation (the reverse of the continual smile that discredits all expression). But when this happy glance passed from Mordecai to rest on Mirah, it acted like a little too much sunshine, and made her change her attitude. She had knelt under an impulse with which any personal embarrassment was incongruous, and especially any thoughts about how Mrs Grandcourt might stand to this new aspect of things – thoughts which made her colour under Deronda's glance, and rise to take her seat again in her usual posture of crossed hands and feet, with the effort to look as quiet as possible. Deronda, equally sensitive, imagined that the feeling of which he was conscious, had entered too much into his eyes, and had been repugnant to her. He was ready enough to believe that any unexpected manifestation might spoil her feeling towards him – and then his precious relation to brother and sister would be marred. If Mirah could have no love for him, any advances of love on his part would make her wretched in that continual contact with him which would remain inevitable.

While such feelings were pulsating quickly in Deronda and Mirah, Mordecai, seeing nothing in his friend's presence and words but a blessed fulfilment, was already speaking with his old sense of enlargement in utterance –

'Daniel, from the first, I have said to you, we know not all the pathways. Has there not been a meeting among them, as of the operations in one soul, where an idea being born and breathing draws the elements towards it, and is fed and grows? For all things are bound together in that Omnipresence which is the place and habitation of the world, and events are as a glass where-through our eyes see some of the pathways. And if it seems that the erring and unloving wills of men have helped to prepare you, as Moses was prepared, to serve your people the better, that depends on another order than the law which must guide our footsteps. For the evil will of man makes not a people's good except by stirring the righteous will of man; and beneath all the clouds with which our thought encompasses the Eternal, this is clear – that a people can be blessed only by having counsellors and a multitude whose will moves in obedience to the laws of justice and love. For see, now, it was your loving will that made a chief pathway, and resisted the effect of evil; for, by performing the duties of brotherhood to my sister, and seeking out her brother in the flesh, your soul has been prepared to receive with gladness this message of the Eternal: "behold the multitude of your brethren." '

'It is quite true that you and Mirah have been my teachers,' said Deronda. 'If this revelation had been made to me before I knew you both, I think my mind would have rebelled against it. Perhaps I should have felt then – "If I could have chosen, I would not have been a Jew." What I feel now is – that my whole being is a consent to the fact. But it has been the gradual accord between your mind and mine which has brought about that full consent.'

At the moment Deronda was speaking, that first evening in the book-shop was vividly in his remembrance, with all the struggling aloofness he had then felt from Mordecai's prophetic confidence. It was his nature to delight in satisfying to the utmost the eagerly-expectant soul, which seemed to be looking out from the face before him, like the long-enduring watcher who at last sees the mounting signal-flame; and he went on with fuller fervour –

'It is through your inspiration that I have discerned what may be my life's task. It is you who have given shape to what, I believe, was an inherited yearning – the effect of brooding, passionate thoughts in many ancestors – thoughts that seem to have been intensely present in my grandfather. Suppose the stolen offspring of some mountain tribe brought up in a city of the plain, or one with an inherited genius for painting, and born blind – the ancestral life would lie within them as a dim longing for unknown objects and sensations, and the spell-bound habit of their inherited frames would be like a cunningly-wrought musical instrument, never played on, but quivering throughout in uneasy mysterious moanings of its intricate structure that, under the right touch, gives music. Something like that, I think, has been my experience. Since I began to read and know, I have always longed for some ideal task, in which I might feel myself the heart and brain of a multitude – some social captainship, which would come to me as a duty, and not be striven for as a personal prize. You have raised the image of such a task for me – to bind our race together in spite of heresy. You have said to me – "Our religions united us before it divided us – it made us a people before it made Rabbanites and

Karaites." I mean to try what can be done with that union – I mean to work in your spirit. Failure will not be ignoble, but it would be ignoble for me not to try.'

'Even as my brother that fed at the breasts of my mother,' said Mordecai, falling back in his chair with a look of exultant repose, as after some finished labour.

To estimate the effect of this ardent outpouring from Deronda we must remember his former reserve, his careful avoidance of premature assent or delusive encouragement, which gave to this decided pledge of himself a sacramental solemnity, both for his own mind and Mordecai's. On Mirah the effect was equally strong, though with a difference: she felt a surprise which had no place in her brother's mind, at Deronda's suddenly revealed sense of nearness to them: there seemed to be a breaking of day around her which might show her other facts unlike her forebodings in the darkness. But after a moment's silence Mordecai spoke again:

'It has begun already – the marriage of our souls. It waits but the passing away of this body, and then they who are betrothed shall unite in a stricter bond, and what is mine shall be thine. Call nothing mine that I have written, Daniel; for though our Masters delivered rightly that everything should be quoted in the name of him that said it – and their rule is good – yet it does not exclude the willing marriage which melts soul into soul, and makes thought fuller as the clear waters are made fuller, where the fulness is inseparable and the clearness is inseparable. For I have judged what I have written, and I desire the body that I gave my thought to pass away as this fleshly body will pass; but let the thought be born again from our fuller soul which shall be called yours.'

'You must not ask me to promise that,' said Deronda, smiling. 'I must be convinced first of special reasons for it in the writings themselves. And I am too backward a pupil yet. That blent transmission must go on without any choice of ours; but what we can't hinder must not make our rule for what we ought to choose. I think our duty is faithful tradition where we can attain it. And so you would insist for any one but yourself. Don't ask me to deny my spiritual parentage, when I am finding the clue of my life in the recognition of my natural parentage.'

'I will ask for no promise till you see the reason,' said Mordecai. 'You have said the truth: I would obey the Masters' rule for another. But for years my hope, nay, my confidence, has been, not that the imperfect image of my thought, which is as the ill-shapen work of the youthful carver who has seen a heavenly pattern, and trembles in imitating the vision – not that this should live, but that my vision and passion should enter into yours – yea, into yours; for he whom I longed for afar, was he not you whom I discerned as mine when you came near? Nevertheless, you shall judge. For my soul is satisfied.' Mordecai paused, and then began in a changed tone, reverting to previous suggestions from Deronda's disclosure: 'What moved your parents—?' but he immediately checked himself, and added, 'Nay, I ask not that you should tell me aught concerning others, unless it is your pleasure.'

'Some time – gradually – you will know all,' said Deronda. 'But now tell me more about yourselves, and how the time has passed since I went away. I am sure there has been some trouble. Mirah has been in distress about something.'

He looked at Mirah, but she immediately turned to her brother, appealing to him to give the difficult answer. She hoped he would not think it necessary to tell Deronda the facts about her father on such an evening as this. Just when Deronda had brought himself so near, and identified himself with her brother, it was cutting to her that he should hear of this disgrace clinging about them, which seemed to have become partly his. To relieve herself she rose to take up her hat and cloak, thinking she would go to her own room: perhaps they would speak more easily when she had left them. But meanwhile Mordecai said –

'To-day there has been a grief. A duty which seemed to have gone far into the distance, has come back and turned its face upon us, and raised no gladness – has raised a dread that we must submit to. But for the moment we are delivered from any visible yoke. Let us defer speaking of it, as if this evening which is deepening about us were the beginning of the festival in which we must offer the first-fruits of our joy, and mingle no mourning with them.'

Deronda divined the hinted grief, and left it in silence, rising as he saw Mirah rise, and saying to her, 'Are you going? I must leave almost immediately – when I and Mrs Adam have mounted the precious chest, and I have delivered the key to Mordecai – no, Ezra, – may I call him Ezra now? I have learned to think of him as Ezra since I have heard you call him so.'

'Please call him Ezra,' said Mirah, faintly, feeling a new timidity under Deronda's glance and near presence. Was there really something different about him, or was the difference only in her feeling? The strangely various emotions of the last few hours had exhausted her; she was faint with fatigue and want of food. Deronda, observing her pallor and tremulousness, longed to show more feeling, but dared not. She put out her hand with an effort to smile, and then he opened the door for her. That was all.

A man of refined pride shrinks from making a lover's approaches to a woman whose wealth or rank might

make them appear presumptuous or low-motived; but Deronda was finding a more delicate difficulty in a position which, superficially taken, was the reverse of that – though to an ardent reverential love, the loved woman has always a kind of wealth and rank which makes a man keenly susceptible about the aspect of his addresses. Deronda's difficulty was what any generous man might have felt in some degree; but it affected him peculiarly through his imaginative sympathy with a mind in which gratitude was strong. Mirah, he knew, felt herself bound to him by deep obligations, which to her sensibilities might give every wish of his the aspect of a claim; and an inability to fulfil it would cause her a pain continually revived by their inevitable communion in care for Ezra. Here were fears not of pride only, but of extreme tenderness. Altogether, to have the character of a benefactor seemed to Deronda's anxiety an insurmountable obstacle to confessing himself a lover, unless in some inconceivable way it could be revealed to him that Mirah's heart had accepted him beforehand. And the agitation on his own account, too, was not small.

Even a man who has practised himself in love-making till his own glibness has rendered him sceptical, may at last be overtaken by the lover's awe – may tremble, stammer, and show other signs of recovered sensibility no more in the range of his acquired talents than pins and needles after numbness: how much more may that energetic timidity possess a man whose inward history has cherished his susceptibilities instead of dulling them, and has kept all the language of passion fresh and rooted as the lovely leafage about the hillside spring!

As for Mirah her dear head lay on its pillow that night with its former suspicions thrown out of shape but still present, like an ugly story which has been discredited but not therefore dissipated. All that she was certain of about Deronda seemed to prove that he had no such fetters upon him as she had been allowing herself to believe in. His whole manner as well as his words implied that there were no hidden bonds remaining to have any effect in determining his future. But notwithstanding this plainly reasonable inference, uneasiness still clung about Mirah's heart. Deronda was not to blame, but he had an importance for Mrs Grandcourt which must give her some hold on him. And the thought of any close confidence between them stirred the little biting snake that had long lain curled and harmless in Mirah's gentle bosom.

But did she this evening feel as completely as before that her jealousy was no less remote from any possibility for herself personally than if her human soul had been lodged in the body of a fawn that Deronda had saved from the archers? Hardly. Something indefinable had happened and made a difference. The soft warm rain of blossoms which had fallen just where she was – did it really come because she was there? What spirit was there among the boughs?

Chapter Sixty-Four

Questa montagna è tale,
Che sempre al cominciar di sotto è grave,
E quanto uom più va su e men fa male.

– DANTE: *Il Purgatorio*[23]

It was not many days after her mother's arrival that Gwendolen would consent to remain at Genoa. Her desire to get away from that gem of the sea, helped to rally her strength and courage. For what place, though it were the flowery vale of Enna, may not the inward sense turn into a circle of punishment where the flowers are no better than a crop of flame-tongues burning the soles of our feet?

'I shall never like to see the Mediterranean again,' said Gwendolen to her mother, who thought that she quite understood her child's feeling – even in her tacit prohibition of any express reference to her late husband.

Mrs Davilow, indeed, though compelled formally to regard this time as one of severe calamity, was virtually enjoying her life more than she had ever done since her daughter's marriage. It seemed that her darling was brought back to her not merely with all the old affection, but with a conscious cherishing of her mother's nearness, such as we give to a possession that we have been on the brink of losing.

'Are you there, mamma?' cried Gwendolen, in the middle of the night (a bed had been made for her mother in the same room with hers), very much as she would have done in her early girlhood, if she had felt frightened in lying awake.

'Yes, dear; can I do anything for you?'

'No, thank you; only I like so to know you are there. Do you mind my waking you?' (This question would hardly have been Gwendolen's in her early girlhood.)

'I was not asleep, darling.'

'It seemed not real that you were with me. I wanted to make it real. I can bear things if you are with me. But you must not lie awake being anxious about me. You must be happy now. You must let me make you happy now at last – else what shall I do?'

'God bless you, dear; I have the best happiness I can have, when you make much of me.'

But the next night, hearing that she was sighing and restless, Mrs Davilow said, 'Let me give you your sleeping-draught, Gwendolen.'

'No, mamma, thank you; I don't want to sleep.'

'It would be so good for you to sleep more, my darling.'

'Don't say what would be good for me, mamma,' Gwendolen answered, impetuously. 'You don't know what would be good for me. You and my uncle must not contradict me and tell me anything is good for me when I feel it is not good.'

Mrs Davilow was silent, not wondering that the poor child was irritable. Presently Gwendolen said –

'I was always naughty to you, mamma.'

'No, dear, no.'

'Yes, I was,' said Gwendolen, insistently. 'It is because I was always wicked that I am miserable now.'

She burst into sobs and cries. The determination to be silent about all the facts of her married life and its close, reacted in these escapes of enigmatic excitement.

But dim lights of interpretation were breaking on the mother's mind through the information that came from Sir Hugo to Mr Gascoigne, and, with some omissions, from Mr Gascoigne to herself. The good-natured baronet, while he was attending to all decent measures in relation to his nephew's death, and the possible washing ashore of the body, thought it the kindest thing he could do to use his present friendly intercourse with the Rector as an opportunity for communicating to him, in the mildest way, the purport of Grandcourt's will, so as to save him the additional shock that would be in store for him if he carried his illusions all the way home. Perhaps Sir Hugo would have been communicable enough without that kind motive, but he really felt the motive. He broke the unpleasant news to the Rector by degrees: at first he only implied his fear that the widow was not so splendidly provided for as Mr Gascoigne, nay, as the baronet himself had expected; and

only at last, after some previous vague reference to large claims on Grandcourt, he disclosed the prior relations which, in the unfortunate absence of a legitimate heir, had determined all the splendour in another direction.

The Rector was deeply hurt, and remembered, more vividly than he had ever done before, how offensively proud and repelling the manners of the deceased had been towards him – remembered also that he himself, in that interesting period just before the arrival of the new occupant at Diplow, had received hints of former entangling dissipations, and an undue addiction to pleasure, though he had not foreseen that the pleasure which had probably, so to speak, been swept into private rubbish-heaps, would ever present itself as an array of live caterpillars, disastrous to the green meat of respectable people. But he did not make these retrospective thoughts audible to Sir Hugo, or lower himself by expressing any indignation on merely personal grounds, but behaved like a man of the world who had become a conscientious clergyman. His first remark was –

'When a young man makes his will in health, he usually counts on living a long while. Probably Mr Grandcourt did not believe that this will would ever have its present effect.' After a moment, he added, 'The effect is painful in more ways than one. Female morality is likely to suffer from this marked advantage and prominence being given to illegitimate offspring.'

'Well, in point of fact,' said Sir Hugo, in his comfortable way, 'since the boy is there, this was really the best alternative for the disposal of the estates. Grandcourt had nobody nearer than his cousin. And it's a chilling thought that you go out of this life only for the benefit of a cousin. A man gets a little pleasure in making his will, if it's for the good of his own curly heads; but it's a nuisance when you're giving and bequeathing to a used-up fellow like yourself, and one you don't care two straws for. It's the next worse thing to having only a life interest in your estates. No; I forgive Grandcourt for that part of his will. But, between ourselves, what I don't forgive him for, is the shabby way he has provided for your niece – *our* niece, I will say – no better a position than if she had been a doctor's widow. Nothing grates on me more than that posthumous grudgingness towards a wife. A man ought to have some pride and fondness for his widow. *I* should, I know. I take it as a test of a man, that he feels the easier about his death when he can think of his wife and daughters being comfortable after it. I like that story of the fellows in the Crimean war, who were ready to go to the bottom of the sea, if their widows were provided for.'

'It has certainly taken me by surprise,' said Mr Gascoigne, 'all the more because, as the one who stood in the place of father to my niece, I had shown my reliance on Mr Grandcourt's apparent liberality in money matters by making no claims for her beforehand. That seemed to me due to him under the circumstances. Probably you think me blamable.'

'Not blamable exactly. I respect a man for trusting another. But take my advice. If you marry another niece, though it may be to the Archbishop of Canterbury, bind him down. Your niece can't be married for the first time twice over. And if he's a good fellow, he'll wish to be bound. But as to Mrs Grandcourt, I can only say that I feel my relation to her all the nearer because I think that she has not been well treated. And I hope you will urge her to rely on me as a friend.'

Thus spake the chivalrous Sir Hugo, in his disgust at the young and beautiful widow of a Mallinger Grandcourt being left with only two thousand a-year and a house in a coal-mining district. To the Rector that income naturally appeared less shabby and less accompanied with mortifying privations; but in this conversation he had devoured a much keener sense than the baronet's of the humiliation cast over his niece, and also over her nearest friends, by the conspicuous publishing of her husband's relation to Mrs Glasher. And like all men who are good husbands and fathers, he felt the humiliation through the minds of the women who would be chiefly affected by it; so that the annoyance of first hearing the facts was far slighter than what he felt in communicating them to Mrs Davilow, and in anticipating Gwendolen's feeling whenever her mother saw fit to tell her of them. For the good Rector had an innocent conviction that his niece was unaware of Mrs Glasher's existence, arguing with masculine soundness from what maidens and wives were likely to know, do, and suffer, and having had a most imperfect observation of the particular maiden and wife in question. Not so Gwendolen's mother, who now thought that she saw an explanation of much that had been enigmatic in her child's conduct and words before and after her engagement, concluding that in some inconceivable way Gwendolen had been informed of this left-handed marriage and the existence of the children. She trusted to opportunities that would arise in moments of affectionate confidence before and during their journey to England, when she might gradually learn how far the actual state of things was clear to Gwendolen, and prepare her for anything that might be a disappointment. But she was spared from devices on the subject.

'I hope you don't expect that I am going to be rich and grand, mamma,' said Gwendolen, not long after the Rector's communication; 'perhaps I shall have nothing at all.'

She was drest, and had been sitting long in quiet meditation. Mrs Davilow was startled, but said, after a moment's reflection –

'Oh yes, dear, you will have something. Sir Hugo knows all about the will.'

‘That will not decide,’ said Gwendolen, abruptly.

‘Surely, dear: Sir Hugo says you are to have two thousand a-year and the house at Gadsmere.’

‘What I have will depend on what I accept,’ said Gwendolen. ‘You and my uncle must not attempt to cross me and persuade me about this. I will do everything I can do to make you happy, but in anything about my husband I must not be interfered with. Is eight hundred a-year enough for you, mamma?’

‘More than enough, dear. You must not think of giving me so much.’ Mrs Davilow paused a little, and then said, ‘Do you know who is to have the estates and the rest of the money?’

‘Yes,’ said Gwendolen, waving her hand in dismissal of the subject. ‘I know everything. It is all perfectly right, and I wish never to have it mentioned.’

The mother was silent, looked away, and rose to fetch a fan-screen, with a slight flush on her delicate cheeks. Wondering, imagining, she did not like to meet her daughter’s eyes, and sat down again under a sad constraint. What wretchedness her child had perhaps gone through, which yet must remain as it always had been, locked away from their mutual speech. But Gwendolen was watching her mother with that new divination which experience had given her; and in tender relenting at her own peremptoriness, she said, ‘Come and sit nearer to me, mamma, and don’t be unhappy.’

Mrs Davilow did as she was told, but bit her lips in the vain attempt to hinder smarting tears. Gwendolen leaned towards her caressingly and said, ‘I mean to be very wise; I do really. And good – oh so good to you, dear, old, sweet mamma, you won’t know me. Only you must not cry.’

The resolve that Gwendolen had in her mind was that she would ask Deronda whether she ought to accept any of her husband’s money – whether she might accept what would enable her to provide for her mother. The poor thing felt strong enough to do anything that would give her a higher place in Deronda’s mind.

An invitation that Sir Hugo pressed on her with kind urgency was that she and Mrs Davilow should go straight with him to Park Lane, and make his house their abode as long as mourning and other details needed attending to in London. Town, he insisted, was just then the most retired of places; and he proposed to exert himself at once in getting all articles belonging to Gwendolen away from the house in Grosvenor Square. No proposal could have suited her better than this of staying a little while in Park Lane. It would be easy for her there to have an interview with Deronda, if she only knew how to get a letter into his hands, asking him to come to her. During the journey Sir Hugo, having understood that she was acquainted with the purport of her husband’s will, ventured to talk before her and to her about her future arrangements, referring here and there to mildly agreeable prospects as matters of course, and otherwise shedding a decorous cheerfulness over her widowed position. It seemed to him really the more graceful course for a widow to recover her spirits on finding that her husband had not dealt as handsomely by her as he might have done; it was the testator’s fault if he compromised all her grief at his departure by giving a testamentary reason for it, so that she might be supposed to look sad not because he had left her, but because he had left her poor. The baronet, having his kindliness doubly fanned by the favourable wind on his own fortunes and by compassion for Gwendolen, had become quite fatherly in his behaviour to her, called her ‘my dear,’ and in mentioning Gadsmere to Mr Gascoigne with its various advantages and disadvantages, spoke of what ‘we’ might do to make the best of that property. Gwendolen sat by in pale silence while Sir Hugo, with his face turned towards Mrs Davilow or Mr Gascoigne, conjectured that Mrs Grandcourt might perhaps prefer letting Gadsmere to residing there during any part of the year, in which case he thought that it might be leased on capital terms to one of the fellows engaged with the coal: Sir Hugo had seen enough of the place to know that it was as comfortable and picturesque a box as any man need desire, providing his desires were circumscribed within a coal area.

‘*I* shouldn’t mind about the soot myself,’ said the baronet, with that dispassionateness which belongs to the potential mood. ‘Nothing is more healthy. And if one’s business lay there, Gadsmere would be a paradise. It makes quite a feature in Scrogg’s history of the county, with the little tower and the fine piece of water – the prettiest print in the book.’

‘A more important place than Offendene, I suppose?’ said Mr Gascoigne.

‘Much,’ said the baronet, decisively. ‘I was there with my poor brother – it is more than a quarter of a century ago, but I remember it very well. The rooms may not be larger, but the grounds are on a different scale.’

‘Our poor dear Offendene is empty after all,’ said Mrs Davilow. ‘When it came to the point, Mr Haynes declared off, and there has been no one to take it since. I might as well have accepted Lord Brackenshaw’s kind offer that I should remain in it another year rent-free: for I should have kept the place aired and warmed.’

‘I hope you have got something snug instead,’ said Sir Hugo.

‘A little too snug,’ said Mr Gascoigne, smiling at his sister-in-law. ‘You are rather thick upon the ground.’

Gwendolen had turned with a changed glance when her mother spoke of Offendene being empty. This conversation passed during one of the long unaccountable pauses often experienced in foreign trains at some

country station. There was a dreamy, sunny stillness over the hedgeless fields stretching to the boundary of poplars; and to Gwendolen the talk within the carriage seemed only to make the dreamland larger with an indistinct region of coal-pits, and a purgatorial Gadsmere which she would never visit; till, at her mother's words, this mingled, dozing view seemed to dissolve and give way to a more wakeful vision of Offendene and Pennicote under their cooler lights. She saw the grey shoulders of the downs, the cattle-specked fields, the shadowy plantations with rutted lanes where the barked timber lay for a wayside seat, the neatly-clipped hedges on the road from the parsonage to Offendene, the avenue where she was gradually discerned from the windows, the hall-door opening, and her mother or one of the troublesome sisters coming out to meet her. All that brief experience of a quiet home which had once seemed a dulness to be fled from, now came back to her as a restful escape, a station where she found the breath of morning and the unreproaching voice of birds, after following a lure through a long Satanic masquerade, which she had entered on with an intoxicated belief in its disguises, and had seen the end of in shrieking fear lest she herself had become one of the evil spirits who were dropping their human mummery and hissing around her with serpent tongues.

In this way Gwendolen's mind paused over Offendene and made it the scene of many thoughts; but she gave no further outward sign of interest in this conversation, any more than in Sir Hugo's opinion on the telegraphic cable or her uncle's views of the Church Rate Abolition Bill. What subjects will not our talk embrace in leisurely day-journeying from Genoa to London? Even strangers, after glancing from China to Peru and opening their mental stores with a liberality threatening a mutual impression of poverty on any future meeting, are liable to become excessively confidential. But the baronet and the Rector were under a still stronger pressure towards cheerful communication: they were like acquaintances compelled to a long drive in a mourning-coach, who having first remarked that the occasion is a melancholy one, naturally proceed to enliven it by the most miscellaneous discourse. 'I don't mind telling *you*,' said Sir Hugo to the Rector, in mentioning some private detail; while the Rector, without saying so, did not mind telling the baronet about his sons, and the difficulty of placing them in the world. By dint of discussing all persons and things within driving-reach of Diplow, Sir Hugo got himself wrought to a pitch of interest in that former home, and of conviction that it was his pleasant duty to regain and strengthen his personal influence in the neighbourhood, that made him declare his intention of taking his family to the place for a month or two before the autumn was over; and Mr Gascoigne cordially rejoiced in that prospect. Altogether, the journey was continued and ended with mutual liking between the male fellow-travellers.

Meanwhile Gwendolen sat by like one who had visited the spirit-world and was full to the lips of an unutterable experience that threw a strange unreality over all the talk she was hearing of her own and the world's business; and Mrs Davilow was chiefly occupied in imagining what her daughter was feeling, and in wondering what was signified by her hinted doubt whether she would accept her husband's bequest. Gwendolen in fact had before her the unscaled wall of an immediate purpose shutting off every other resolution. How to scale the wall? She wanted again to see and consult Deronda, that she might secure herself against any act he would disapprove. Would her remorse have maintained its power within her, or would she have felt absolved by secrecy, if it had not been for that outer conscience which was made for her by Deronda? It is hard to say how much we could forgive ourselves if we were secure from judgment by another whose opinion is the breathing-medium of all our joy – who brings to us with close pressure and immediate sequence that judgment of the Invisible and Universal which self-flattery and the world's tolerance would easily melt and disperse. In this way our brother may be in the stead of God to us, and his opinion which has pierced even to the joints and marrow, may be our virtue in the making. That mission of Deronda to Gwendolen had begun with what she had felt to be his judgment of her at the gaming-table. He might easily have spoiled it: – much of our lives is spent in marring our own influence and turning others' belief in us into a widely concluding unbelief which they call knowledge of the world, while it is really disappointment in you or me. Deronda had not spoiled his mission.

But Gwendolen had forgotten to ask him for his address in case she wanted to write, and her only way of reaching him was through Sir Hugo. She was not in the least blind to the construction that all witnesses might put on her giving signs of dependence on Deronda, and her seeking him more than he sought her: Grandcourt's rebukes had sufficiently enlightened her pride. But the force, the tenacity of her nature had thrown itself into that dependence, and she would no more let go her hold on Deronda's help, or deny herself the interview her soul needed, because of witnesses, than if she had been in prison in danger of being condemned to death. When she was in Park Lane and knew that the baronet would be going down to the Abbey immediately (just to see his family for a couple of days and then return to transact needful business for Gwendolen), she said to him without any air of hesitation, while her mother was present –

'Sir Hugo, I wish to see Mr Deronda again as soon as possible. I don't know his address. Will you tell it me, or let him know that I want to see him?'

A quick thought passed across Sir Hugo's face, but made no difference to the ease with which he said, 'Upon

my word, I don't know whether he's at his chambers or the Abbey at this moment. But I'll make sure of him. I'll send a note now to his chambers telling him to come, and if he's at the Abbey I can give him your message and send him up at once. I am sure he will want to obey your wish,' the baronet ended, with grave kindness, as if nothing could seem to him more in the appropriate course of things than that she should send such a message.

But he was convinced that Gwendolen had a passionate attachment to Deronda, the seeds of which had been laid long ago, and his former suspicion now recurred to him with more strength than ever, that her feeling was likely to lead her into imprudences – in which kind-hearted Sir Hugo was determined to screen and defend her as far as lay in his power. To him it was as pretty a story as need be that this fine creature and his favourite Dan should have turned out to be formed for each other, and that the unsuitable husband should have made his exit in such excellent time. Sir Hugo liked that a charming woman should be made as happy as possible. In truth, what most vexed his mind in this matter at present was a doubt whether the too lofty and inscrutable Dan had not got some scheme or other in his head, which would prove to be dearer to him than the lovely Mrs Grandcourt, and put that neatly-prepared marriage with her out of the question. It was among the usual paradoxes of feeling that Sir Hugo, who had given his fatherly cautions to Deronda against too much tenderness in his relations with the bride, should now feel rather irritated against him by the suspicion that he had not fallen in love as he ought to have done. Of course all this thinking on Sir Hugo's part was eminently premature, only a fortnight or so after Grandcourt's death. But it is the trick of thinking to be either premature or behindhand.

However, he sent the note to Deronda's chambers, and it found him there.

Chapter Sixty-Five

O, welcome, pure-eyed Faith, white-handed Hope,
Thou hovering angel, girt with golden wings!

– MILTON

Deronda did not obey Gwendolen's new summons without some agitation. Not his vanity, but his keen sympathy made him susceptible to the danger that another's heart might feel larger demands on him than he would be able to fulfil; and it was no longer a matter of argument with him, but of penetrating consciousness, that Gwendolen's soul clung to his with a passionate need. We do not argue the existence of the anger or the scorn that thrills through us in a voice; we simply feel it, and it admits of no disproof. Deronda felt this woman's destiny hanging on his over a precipice of despair. Any one who knows him cannot wonder at his inward confession, that if all this had happened little more than a year ago, he would hardly have asked himself whether he loved her: the impetuous determining impulse which would have moved him would have been to save her from sorrow, to shelter her life for evermore from the dangers of loneliness, and carry out to the last the rescue he had begun in that monitory redemption of the necklace. But now, love and duty had thrown other bonds around him, and that impulse could no longer determine his life; still, it was present in him as a compassionate yearning, a painful quivering at the very imagination of having again and again to meet the appeal of her eyes and words. The very strength of the bond, the certainty of the resolve, that kept him asunder from her, made him gaze at her lot apart with the more aching pity.

He awaited her coming in the back drawing-room – part of that white and crimson space where they had sat together at the musical party, where Gwendolen had said for the first time that her lot depended on his not forsaking her, and her appeal had seemed to melt into the melodic cry – *Per pietà non dirmi addio*. But the melody had come from Mirah's dear voice.

Deronda walked about this room, which he had for years known by heart, with a strange sense of metamorphosis in his own life. The familiar objects around him, from Lady Mallinger's gently smiling portrait to the also human and urbane faces of the lions on the pilasters of the chimney-piece, seemed almost to belong to a previous state of existence which he was revisiting in memory only, not in reality; so deep and transforming had been the impressions he had lately experienced, so new were the conditions under which he found himself in the house he had been accustomed to think of as a home – standing with his hat in his hand awaiting the entrance of a young creature whose life had also been undergoing a transformation – a tragic transformation towards a wavering result, in which he felt with apprehensiveness that his own action was still bound up.

But Gwendolen was come in, looking changed, not only by her mourning dress, but by a more satisfied quietude of expression than he had seen in her face at Genoa. Her satisfaction was that Deronda was there; but there was no smile between them as they met and clasped hands: each was full of remembrances – full of anxious prevision. She said, 'It was good of you to come. Let us sit down,' immediately seating herself in the nearest chair. He placed himself opposite to her.

'I asked you to come because I want you to tell me what I ought to do,' she began, at once. 'Don't be afraid of telling me what you think is right, because it seems hard. I have made up my mind to do it. I was afraid once of being poor; I could not bear to think of being under other people; and that was why I did something – why I married. I have borne worse things now. I think I could bear to be poor, if you think I ought. Do you know about my husband's will?'

'Yes, Sir Hugo told me,' said Deronda, already guessing the question she had to ask.

'Ought I to take anything he has left me? I will tell you what I have been thinking,' said Gwendolen, with a more nervous eagerness. 'Perhaps you may not quite know that I really did think a good deal about my mother when I married. I *was* selfish, but I did love her, and feel about her poverty; and what comforted me most at first, when I was miserable, was her being better off because I had married. The thing that would be hardest to me now would be to see her in poverty again; and I have been thinking that if I took enough to provide for her, and no more – nothing for myself – it would not be wrong; for I was very precious to my mother – and he took me from her – and he meant – and if she had known—'

Gwendolen broke off. She had been preparing herself for this interview by thinking of hardly anything else than this question of right towards her mother; but the question had carried with it thoughts and reasons which it was impossible for her to utter, and these perilous remembrances swarmed between her words, making her speech more and more agitated and tremulous. She looked down helplessly at her hands, now unladen of all rings except her wedding-ring.

'Do not hurt yourself by speaking of that,' said Deronda, tenderly. 'There is no need; the case is very simple. I think I can hardly judge wrongly about it. You consult me because I am the only person to whom you have confided the most painful part of your experience; and I can understand your scruples.' He did not go on immediately, waiting for her to recover herself. The silence seemed to Gwendolen full of the tenderness that she heard in his voice, and she had courage to lift up her eyes and look at him as he said, 'You are conscious of something which you feel to be a crime towards one who is dead. You think that you have forfeited all claim as a wife. You shrink from taking what was his. You want to keep yourself pure from profiting by his death. Your feeling even urges you to some self-punishment – some scourging of the self that disobeyed your better will – the will that struggled against temptation. I have known something of that myself. Do I understand you?'

'Yes – at least, I want to be good – not like what I have been,' said Gwendolen. 'I will try to bear what you think I ought to bear. I have tried to tell you the worst about myself. What ought I to do?'

'If no one but yourself were concerned in this question of income,' said Deronda, 'I should hardly dare to urge you against any remorseful prompting; but I take as a guide now your feeling about Mrs Davilow, which seems to me quite just. I cannot think that your husband's dues even to yourself are nullified by any act you have committed. He voluntarily entered into your life, and affected its course in what is always the most momentous way. But setting that aside, it was due from him in his position that he should provide for your mother, and he of course understood that if this will took effect she would share the provision he had made for you.'

'She has had eight hundred a-year. What I thought of was to take that and leave the rest,' said Gwendolen. She had been so long inwardly arguing for this as a permission, that her mind could not at once take another attitude.

'I think it is not your duty to fix a limit in that way,' said Deronda. 'You would be making a painful enigma for Mrs Davilow; an income from which you shut yourself out must be embittered to her. And your own course would become too difficult. We agreed at Genoa that the burthen on your conscience is what no one ought to be admitted to the knowledge of. The future beneficence of your life will be best furthered by your saving all others from the pain of that knowledge. In my opinion you ought simply to abide by the provisions of your husband's will, and let your remorse tell only on the use that you will make of your monetary independence.'

In uttering the last sentence Deronda automatically took up his hat, which he had laid on the floor beside him. Gwendolen, sensitive to his slightest movement, felt her heart giving a great leap, as if it too had a consciousness of its own, and would hinder him from going: in the same moment she rose from her chair, unable to reflect that the movement was an acceptance of his apparent intention to leave her; and Deronda of course also rose, advancing a little.

'I will do what you tell me,' said Gwendolen, hurriedly; 'but what else shall I do?' No other than these simple words were possible to her; and even these were too much for her in a state of emotion where her proud secrecy was disenthroned: as the childlike sentences fell from her lips they reacted on her like a picture of her own helplessness, and she could not check the sob which sent the large tears to her eyes. Deronda, too, felt a crushing pain; but imminent consequences were visible to him, and urged him to the utmost exertion of conscience. When she had pressed her tears away, he said, in a gently questioning tone –

'You will probably be soon going with Mrs Davilow into the country?'

'Yes, in a week or ten days.' Gwendolen waited an instant, turning her eyes vaguely towards the window, as if looking at some imagined prospect. 'I want to be kind to them all – they can be happier than I can. Is that the best I can do?'

'I think so. It is a duty that cannot be doubtful,' said Deronda. He paused a little between his sentences, feeling a weight of anxiety on all his words. 'Other duties will spring from it. Looking at your life as a debt may seem the dreariest view of things at a distance; but it cannot really be so. What makes life dreary is the want of motive; but once beginning to act with that penitential, loving purpose you have in your mind, there will be unexpected satisfactions – there will be newly-opening needs – continually coming to carry you on from day to day. You will find your life growing like a plant.'

Gwendolen turned her eyes on him with the look of one athirst towards the sound of unseen waters. Deronda felt the look as if she had been stretching her arms towards him from a forsaken shore. His voice took an affectionate imploringness when he said –

‘This sorrow, which has cut down to the root, has come to you while you are so young – try to think of it, not as a spoiling of your life, but as a preparation for it. Let it be a preparation—’ Any one overhearing his tones would have thought he was entreating for his own happiness. ‘See! you have been saved from the worst evils that might have come from your marriage, which you feel was wrong. You have had a vision of injurious, selfish action – a vision of possible degradation; think that a severe angel, seeing you along the road of error, grasped you by the wrist, and showed you the horror of the life you must avoid. And it has come to you in your springtime. Think of it as a preparation. You can, you will, be among the best of women, such as make others glad that they were born.’

The words were like the touch of a miraculous hand to Gwendolen. Mingled emotions streamed through her frame with a strength that seemed the beginning of a new existence, having some new powers or other which stirred in her vaguely. So pregnant is the divine hope of moral recovery with the energy that fulfils it. So potent in us is the infused action of another soul, before which we bow in complete love. But the new existence seemed inseparable from Deronda: the hope seemed to make his presence permanent. It was not her thought, that he loved her and would cling to her – a thought would have tottered with improbability; it was her spiritual breath. For the first time since that terrible moment on the sea a flush rose and spread over her cheek, brow, and neck, deepened an instant or two, and then gradually disappeared. She did not speak.

Deronda advanced and put out his hand, saying, ‘I must not weary you.’

She was startled by the sense that he was going, and put her hand in his, still without speaking.

‘You look ill yet – unlike yourself,’ he added, while he held her hand.

‘I can’t sleep much,’ she answered, with some return of her dispirited manner. ‘Things repeat themselves in me so. They come back – they will all come back,’ she ended, shudderingly, a chill fear threatening her.

‘By degrees they will be less insistent,’ said Deronda. He could not drop her hand or move away from her abruptly.

‘Sir Hugo says he shall come to stay at Diplow,’ said Gwendolen, snatching at previously intended words which had slipped away from her. ‘You will come too.’

‘Probably,’ said Deronda, and then feeling that the word was cold, he added, correctively, ‘Yes, I shall come,’ and then released her hand, with the final friendly pressure of one who has virtually said good-bye.

‘And not again here, before I leave town?’ said Gwendolen, with timid sadness, looking as pallid as ever.

What could Deronda say? ‘If I can be of any use – if you wish me – certainly I will.’

‘I must wish it,’ said Gwendolen, impetuously; ‘you know I must wish it. What strength have I? Who else is there?’ Again a sob was rising.

Deronda felt a pang, which showed itself in his face. He looked miserable as he said, ‘I will certainly come.’

Gwendolen perceived the change in his face; but the intense relief of expecting him to come again could not give way to any other feeling, and there was a recovery of the inspired hope and courage in her.

‘Don’t be unhappy about me,’ she said, in a tone of affectionate assurance. ‘I shall remember your words – every one of them. I shall remember what you believe about me; I shall try.’

She looked at him firmly, and put out her hand again as if she had forgotten what had passed since those words of his which she promised to remember. But there was no approach to a smile on her lips. She had never smiled since her husband’s death. When she stood still and in silence, she looked like a melancholy statue of the Gwendolen whose laughter had once been so ready when others were grave.

It is only by remembering the searching anguish which had changed the aspect of the world for her that we can understand her behaviour to Deronda – the unreflecting openness, nay, the importunate pleading, with which she expressed her dependence on him. Considerations such as would have filled the minds of indifferent spectators could not occur to her, any more than if flames had been mounting around her, and she had flung herself into his opened arms and clung about his neck that he might carry her into safety. She identified him with the struggling regenerative process in her which had begun with his action. Is it any wonder that she saw her own necessity reflected in his feeling? She was in that state of unconscious reliance and expectation which is a common experience with us when we are preoccupied with our own trouble or our own purposes. We diffuse our feeling over others, and count on their acting from our motives. Her imagination had not been turned to a future union with Deronda by any other than the spiritual tie which had been continually strengthening; but also it had not been turned towards a future separation from him. Love-making and marriage – how could they now be the imagery in which poor Gwendolen’s deepest attachment could spontaneously clothe itself? Mighty Love had laid his hand upon her; but what had he demanded of her? Acceptance of rebuke – the hard task of self-change – confession – endurance. If she cried towards him, what then? She cried as the child cries whose little feet have fallen backward – cried to be taken by the hand, lest she should lose herself.

The cry pierced Deronda. What position could have been more difficult for a man full of tenderness, yet with clear foresight? He was the only creature who knew the real nature of Gwendolen’s trouble: to withdraw

himself from any appeal of hers would be to consign her to a dangerous loneliness. He could not reconcile himself to the cruelty of apparently rejecting her dependence on him; and yet in the nearer or farther distance he saw a coming wrench, which all present strengthening of their bond would make the harder.

He was obliged to risk that. He went once and again to Park Lane before Gwendolen left; but their interviews were in the presence of Mrs Davilow, and were therefore less agitating. Gwendolen, once she had determined to accept her income, had conceived a project which she liked to speak of: it was, to place her mother and sisters with herself in Offendene again, and, as she said, piece back her life on to that time when they first went there, and when everything was happiness about her, only she did not know it. The idea had been mentioned to Sir Hugo, who was going to exert himself about the letting of Gadsmere for a rent which would more than pay the rent of Offendene. All this was told to Deronda, who willingly dwelt on a subject that seemed to give some soothing occupation to Gwendolen. He said nothing, and she asked nothing, of what chiefly occupied himself. Her mind was fixed on his coming to Diplow before the autumn was over; and she no more thought of the Lapidoths – the little Jewess and her brother – as likely to make a difference in her destiny, than of the fermenting political and social leaven which was making a difference in the history of the world. In fact, poor Gwendolen's memory had been stunned, and all outside the lava-lit track of her troubled conscience, and her effort to get deliverance from it, lay for her in dim forgetfulness.

Chapter Sixty-Six

One day still fierce 'mid many a day struck calm.

– BROWNING: *The Ring and the Book*

Meanwhile Ezra and Mirah, whom Gwendolen did not include in her thinking about Deronda, were having their relation to him drawn closer and brought into fuller light.

The father Lapidoth had quitted his daughter at the doorstep, ruled by that possibility of staking something in play or betting which presented itself with the handling of any sum beyond the price of staying actual hunger, and left no care for alternative prospects or resolutions. Until he had lost everything he never considered whether he would apply to Mirah again or whether he would brave his son's presence. In the first moment he had shrunk from encountering Ezra as he would have shrunk from any other situation of disagreeable constraint; and the possession of Mirah's purse was enough to banish the thought of future necessities. The gambling appetite is more absolutely dominant than bodily hunger, which can be neutralised by an emotional or intellectual excitation; but the passion for watching chances – the habitual suspensive poise of the mind in actual or imaginary play – nullifies the susceptibility to other excitation. In its final, imperious stage, it seems the unjoyous dissipation of demons, seeking diversion on the burning marl of perdition.

But every form of selfishness, however abstract and unhuman, requires the support of at least one meal a-day; and though Lapidoth's appetite for food and drink was extremely moderate, he had slipped into a shabby, unfriended form of life in which the appetite could not be satisfied without some ready money. When, in a brief visit at a house which announced 'Pyramids' on the window-blind, he had first doubled and trebled and finally lost Mirah's thirty shillings, he went out with her empty purse in his pocket, already balancing in his mind whether he should get another immediate stake by pawning the purse, or whether he should go back to her giving himself a good countenance by restoring the purse, and declaring that he had used the money in paying a score that was standing against him. Besides, among the sensibilities still left strong in Lapidoth was the sensibility to his own claims, and he appeared to himself to have a claim on any property his children might possess, which was stronger than the justice of his son's resentment. After all, to take up his lodging with his children was the best thing he could do; and the more he thought of meeting Ezra the less he winced from it, his imagination being more wrought on by the chances of his getting something into his pocket with safety and without exertion, than by the threat of a private humiliation. Luck had been against him lately; he expected it to turn – and might not the turn begin with some opening of supplies which would present itself through his daughter's affairs and the good friends she had spoken of? Lapidoth counted on the fascination of his cleverness – an old habit of mind which early experience had sanctioned; and it is not only women who are unaware of their diminished charm, or imagine that they can feign not to be worn out.

The result of Lapidoth's rapid balancing was that he went towards the little square in Brompton with the hope that, by walking about and watching, he might catch sight of Mirah going out or returning, in which case his entrance into the house would be made easier. But it was already evening – the evening of the day next to that on which he had first seen her; and after a little waiting, weariness made him reflect that he might ring, and if she were not at home, he might ask the time at which she was expected. But on coming near the house he knew that she was at home: he heard her singing.

Mirah, seated at the piano, was pouring forth '*Herz, mein Herz*,' while Ezra was listening with his eyes shut, when Mrs Adam opened the door, and said in some embarrassment –

'A gentleman below says he is your father, miss.'

'I will go down to him,' said Mirah, starting up immediately and looking towards her brother.

'No, Mirah, not so,' said Ezra, with decision. 'Let him come up, Mrs Adam.'

Mirah stood with her hands pinching each other, and feeling sick with anxiety, while she continued looking at Ezra, who had also risen, and was evidently much shaken. But there was an expression in his face which she had never seen before; his brow was knit, his lips seemed hardened with the same severity that gleamed from his eyes.

When Mrs Adam opened the door to let in the father, she could not help casting a look at the group, and

after glancing from the younger man to the elder, said to herself as she closed the door, 'Father, sure enough.' The likeness was that of outline, which is always most striking at the first moment; the expression had been wrought into the strongest contrast by such hidden or inconspicuous differences as can make the genius of a Cromwell within the outward type of a father who was no more than a respectable parishioner.

Lapidoth had put on a melancholy expression beforehand, but there was some real wincing in his frame as he said –

'Well, Ezra, my boy, you hardly know me after so many years.'

'I know you – too well – father,' said Ezra, with a slow biting solemnity which made the word father a reproach.

'Ah, you are not pleased with me. I don't wonder at it. Appearances have been against me. When a man gets into straits he can't do just as he would by himself or anybody else. *I*'ve suffered enough, I know,' said Lapidoth, quickly. In speaking he always recovered some glibness and hardhood; and now turning towards Mirah, he held out her purse, saying, 'Here's your little purse, my dear. I thought you'd be anxious about it because of that bit of writing. I've emptied it, you'll see, for I had a score to pay for food and lodging. I knew you would like me to clear myself, and here I stand – without a single farthing in my pocket – at the mercy of my children. You can turn me out if you like, without getting a policeman. Say the word, Mirah; say, "Father, I've had enough of you; you made a pet of me, and spent your all on me, when I couldn't have done without you; but I can do better without you now," – say that, and I'm gone out like a spark. I shan't spoil your pleasure again.' The tears were in his voice as usual, before he had finished.

'You know I could never say it, father,' answered Mirah, with not the less anguish because she felt the falsity of everything in his speech except the implied wish to remain in the house.

'Mirah, my sister, leave us!' said Ezra, in a tone of authority.

She looked at her brother falteringly, beseechingly – in awe of his decision, yet unable to go without making a plea for this father who was like something that had grown in her flesh with pain, but that she could never have cut away without worse pain. She went close to her brother, and putting her hand in his, said, in a low voice, but not so low as to be unheard by Lapidoth, 'Remember, Ezra – you said my mother would not have shut him out.'

'Trust me, and go,' said Ezra.

She left the room, but after going a few steps up the stairs, sat down with a palpitating heart. If, because of anything her brother said to him, he went away —

Lapidoth had some sense of what was being prepared for him in his son's mind, but he was beginning to adjust himself to the situation and find a point of view that would give him a cool superiority to any attempt at humiliating him. This haggard son, speaking as from a sepulchre, had the incongruity which selfish levity learns to see in suffering and death, until the unrelenting pincers of disease clutch its own flesh. Whatever preaching he might deliver must be taken for a matter of course, as a man finding shelter from hail in an open cathedral might take a little religious howling that happened to be going on there.

Lapidoth was not born with this sort of callousness: he had achieved it.

'This home that we have here,' Ezra began, 'is maintained partly by the generosity of a beloved friend who supports me, and partly by the labours of my sister, who supports herself. While we have a home we will not shut you out from it. We will not cast you out to the mercy of your vices. For you are our father, and though you have broken your bond, we acknowledge ours. But I will never trust you. You absconded with money, leaving your debts unpaid you forsook my mother; you robbed her of her little child and broke her heart; you have become a gambler, and where shame and conscience were, there sits an insatiable desire; you were ready to sell my sister – you had sold her, but the price was denied you. The man who has done these things must never expect to be trusted any more. We will share our food with you – you shall have a bed, and clothing. We will do this duty to you, because you are our father. But you will never be trusted. You are an evil man: you made the misery of our mother. That such a man is our father is a brand on our flesh which will not cease smarting. But the Eternal has laid it upon us; and though human justice were to flog you for crimes, and your body fell helpless before the public scorn – we would still say, "This is our father; make way, that we may carry him out of your sight." '

Lapidoth, in adjusting himself to what was coming, had not been able to foresee the exact intensity of the lightning or the exact course it would take – that it would not fall outside his frame but through it. He could not foresee what was so new to him as this voice from the soul of his son. It touched that spring of hysterical excitability which Mirah used to witness in him when he sat at home and sobbed. As Ezra ended, Lapidoth threw himself into a chair and cried like a woman, burying his face against the table – and yet, strangely, while this hysterical crying was an inevitable reaction in him under the stress of his son's words, it was also a conscious resource in a difficulty; just as in early life, when he was a bright-faced curly young man, he had been used to avail himself of this subtly-poised physical susceptibility to turn the edge of resentment or

disapprobation.

Ezra sat down again and said nothing – exhausted by the shock of his own irrepressible utterance, the outburst of feelings which for years he had borne in solitude and silence. His thin hands trembled on the arms of the chair; he would hardly have found voice to answer a question; he felt as if he had taken a step towards beckoning Death. Meanwhile Mirah's quick expectant ear detected a sound which her heart recognised: she could not stay out of the room any longer. But on opening the door her immediate alarm was for Ezra, and it was to his side that she went, taking his trembling hand in hers, which he pressed and found support in; but he did not speak, or even look at her. The father with his face buried was conscious that Mirah had entered, and presently lifted up his head, pressed his handkerchief against his eyes, put out his hand towards her, and said with plaintive hoarseness, 'Good-bye, Mirah; your father will not trouble you again. He deserves to die like a dog by the roadside, and he will. If your mother had lived, she would have forgiven me – thirty-four years ago I put the ring on her finger under the *Chuppa*, and we were made one. She would have forgiven me, and we should have spent our old age together. But I haven't deserved it. Good-bye.'

He rose from the chair as he said the last 'good-bye.' Mirah had put her hand in his and held him. She was not tearful and grieving, but frightened and awe-struck, as she cried out –

'No, father, no!' Then turning to her brother, 'Ezra, you have not forbidden him? – Stay, father, and leave off wrong things. Ezra, I cannot bear it. How can I say to my father, "Go and die!" '

'I have not said it,' Ezra answered, with great effort. 'I have said, stay and be sheltered.'

'Then you will stay, father – and be taken care of – and come with me,' said Mirah, drawing him towards the door.

This was really what Lapidoth wanted. And for the moment he felt a sort of comfort in recovering his daughter's dutiful tendance, that made a change of habits seem possible to him. She led him down to the parlour below, and said –

'This is my sitting-room when I am not with Ezra, and there is a bedroom behind which shall be yours. You will stay and be good, father. Think that you are come back to my mother, and that she has forgiven you – she speaks to you through me.' Mirah's tones were imploring, but she could not give one of her former caresses.

Lapidoth quickly recovered his composure, began to speak to Mirah of the improvement in her voice, and other easy subjects, and when Mrs Adam came to lay out his supper, entered into converse with her in order to show her that he was not a common person, though his clothes were just now against him.

But in his usual wakefulness at night, he fell to wondering what money Mirah had by her, and went back over old Continental hours at *Roulette*, reproducing the method of his play, and the chances that had frustrated it. He had had his reasons for coming to England, but for most things it was a cursed country.

These were the stronger visions of the night with Lapidoth, and not the worn frame of his ireful son uttering a terrible judgment. Ezra did pass across the gaming-table, and his words were audible; but he passed like an insubstantial ghost, and his words had the heart eaten out of them by numbers and movements that seemed to make the very tissue of Lapidoth's consciousness.

Chapter Sixty-Seven

> The godhead in us wrings our nobler deeds
> From our reluctant selves.

It was an unpleasant surprise to Deronda when he returned from the Abbey to find the undesirable father installed in the lodgings at Brompton. Mirah had felt it necessary to speak of Deronda to her father, and even to make him as fully aware as she could of the way in which the friendship with Ezra had begun, and of the sympathy which had cemented it. She passed more lightly over what Deronda had done for her, omitting altogether the rescue from drowning, and speaking of the shelter she had found in Mrs Meyrick's family so as to leave her father to suppose that it was through these friends Deronda had become acquainted with her. She could not persuade herself to more completeness in her narrative: she could not let the breath of her father's soul pass over her relation to Deronda. And Lapidoth, for reasons, was not eager in his questioning about the circumstances of her flight and arrival in England. But he was much interested in the fact of his children having a beneficent friend apparently high in the world.

It was the brother who told Deronda of this new condition added to their life. 'I am become calm in beholding him now,' Ezra ended, 'and I try to think it possible that my sister's tenderness, and the daily tasting a life of peace, may win him to remain aloof from temptation. I have enjoined her, and she has promised, to trust him with no money. I have convinced her that he will buy with it his own destruction.'

Deronda first came on the third day from Lapidoth's arrival. The new clothes for which he had been measured were not yet ready, and wishing to make a favourable impression he did not choose to present himself in the old ones. He watched for Deronda's departure, and getting a view of him from the window was rather surprised at his youthfulness, which Mirah had not mentioned, and which he had somehow thought out of the question in a personage who had taken up a grave friendship and hoary studies with the sepulchral Ezra. Lapidoth began to imagine that Deronda's real or chief motive must be that he was in love with Mirah. And so much the better; for a tie to Mirah had more promise of indulgence for her father than the tie to Ezra; and Lapidoth was not without the hope of recommending himself to Deronda, and of softening any hard prepossessions. He was behaving with much amiability, and trying in all ways at his command to get himself into easy domestication with his children – entering into Mirah's music, showing himself docile about smoking, which Mrs Adam could not tolerate in her parlour, and walking out in the square with his German pipe and the tobacco with which Mirah supplied him. He was too acute to venture any present remonstrance against the refusal of money, which Mirah told him that she must persist in as a solemn duty promised to her brother. He was comfortable enough to wait.

The next time Deronda came, Lapidoth, equipped in his new clothes and satisfied with his own appearance, was in the room with Ezra, who was teaching himself, as part of his severe duty, to tolerate his father's presence whenever it was imposed. Deronda was cold and distant, the first sight of this man, who had blighted the lives of his wife and children, creating in him a repulsion that was even a physical discomfort. But Lapidoth did not let himself be discouraged, asked leave to stay and hear the reading of papers from the old chest, and actually made himself useful in helping to decipher some difficult German manuscript. This led him to suggest that it might be desirable to make a transcription of the manuscript, and he offered his services for this purpose, and also to make copies of any papers in Roman characters. Though Ezra's young eyes, he observed, were getting weak, his own were still strong. Deronda accepted the offer, thinking that Lapidoth showed a sign of grace in the willingness to be employed usefully; and he saw a gratified expression in Ezra's face, who, however, presently said, 'Let all the writing be done here; for I cannot trust the papers out of my sight, lest there be an accident by burning or otherwise.' Poor Ezra felt very much as if he had a convict on leave under his charge. Unless he saw his father working, it was not possible to believe that he would work in good faith. But by this arrangement he fastened on himself the burthen of his father's presence, which was made painful not only through his deepest, longest associations, but also through Lapidoth's restlessness of temperament, which showed itself the more as he became familiarised with his situation, and lost any awe he had felt of his son. The fact was, he was putting a strong constraint on himself in confining his attention for the sake of winning Deronda's favour; and like a man in an uncomfortable garment he gave himself relief at

every opportunity, going out to smoke, or moving about and talking, or throwing himself back in his chair and remaining silent, but incessantly carrying on a dumb language of facial movement or gesticulation; and if Mirah were in the room, he would fall into his old habit of talk with her, gossiping about their former doings and companions, or repeating quirks, and stories, and plots of the plays he used to adapt, in the belief that he could at will command the vivacity of his earlier time. All this was a mortal infliction to Ezra; and when Mirah was at home she tried to relieve him, by getting her father down into the parlour and keeping watch over him there. What duty is made of a single difficult resolve? The difficulty lies in the daily unflinching support of consequences that mar the blessed return of morning with the prospect of irritation to be suppressed or shame to be endured. And such consequences were being borne by these, as by many other, heroic children of an unworthy father – with the prospect, at least to Mirah, of their stretching onward through the solid part of life.

Meanwhile Lapidoth's presence had raised a new impalpable partition between Deronda and Mirah – each of them dreading the soiling inferences of his mind, each of them interpreting mistakenly the increased reserve and diffidence of the other. But it was not very long before some light came to Deronda.

As soon as he could, after returning from his brief visit to the Abbey, he had called at Hans Meyrick's rooms, feeling it, on more grounds than one, a due of friendship that Hans should be at once acquainted with the reasons of his late journey, and the changes of intention it had brought about. Hans was not there; he was said to be in the country for a few days; and Deronda, after leaving a note, waited a week, rather expecting a note in return. But receiving no word, and fearing some freak of feeling in the incalculably susceptible Hans, whose proposed sojourn at the Abbey he knew had been deferred, he at length made a second call, and was admitted into the painting-room, where he found his friend in a light coat, without a waistcoat, his long hair still wet from a bath, but with a face looking worn and wizened – anything but country-like. He had taken up his palette and brushes, and stood before his easel when Deronda entered, but the equipment and attitude seemed to have been got up on short notice.

As they shook hands, Deronda said, 'You don't look much as if you had been in the country, old fellow. Is it Cambridge you have been to?'

'No,' said Hans, curtly, throwing down his palette with the air of one who has begun to feign by mistake; then, pushing forward a chair for Deronda, he threw himself into another, and leaned backward with his hands behind his head, while he went on, 'I've been to I-don't-know-where – No man's land – and a mortally unpleasant country it is.'

'You don't mean to say you have been drinking, Hans,' said Deronda, who had seated himself opposite, in anxious survey.

'Nothing so good. I've been smoking opium. I always meant to do it some time or other, to try how much bliss could be got by it; and having found myself just now rather out of other bliss, I thought it judicious to seize the opportunity. But I pledge you my word I shall never tap a cask of that bliss again. It disagrees with my constitution.'

'What has been the matter? You were in good spirits enough when you wrote to me.'

'Oh, nothing in particular. The world began to look seedy – a sort of cabbage-garden with all the cabbages cut. A malady of genius, you may be sure,' said Hans, creasing his face into a smile; 'and, in fact, I was tired of being virtuous without reward, especially in this hot London weather.'

'Nothing else? No real vexation?' said Deronda.

Hans shook his head.

'I came to tell you of my own affairs, but I can't do it with a good grace if you are to hide yours.'

'Haven't an affair in the world,' said Hans, in a flighty way, 'except a quarrel with a bric-à-brac man. Besides, as it is the first time in our lives that you ever spoke to me about your own affairs, you are only beginning to pay a pretty long debt.'

Deronda felt convinced that Hans was behaving artificially, but he trusted to a return of the old frankness by-and-by if he gave his own confidence.

'You laughed at the mystery of my journey to Italy, Hans,' he began. 'It was for an object that touched my happiness at the very roots. I had never known anything about my parents, and I really went to Genoa to meet my mother. My father has been long dead – died when I was an infant. My mother was the daughter of an eminent Jew; my father was her cousin. Many things had caused me to think of this origin as almost a probability before I set out. I was so far prepared for the result that I was glad of it – glad to find myself a Jew.'

'You must not expect me to look surprised, Deronda,' said Hans, who had changed his attitude, laying one leg across the other and examining the heel of his slipper.

'You knew it?'

'My mother told me. She went to the house the morning after you had been there – brother and sister both

told her. You may imagine we can't rejoice as they do. But whatever you are glad of, I shall come to be glad of in the end – *when* exactly the end may be I can't predict,' said Hans, speaking in a low tone, which was as unusual with him as it was to be out of humour with his lot, and yet bent on making no fuss about it.

'I quite understand that you can't share my feeling,' said Deronda; 'but I could not let silence lie between us on what casts quite a new light over my future. I have taken up some of Mordecai's ideas, and I mean to try and carry them out, so far as one man's efforts can go. I daresay I shall by-and-by travel to the East and be away for some years.'

Hans said nothing, but rose, seized his palette and began to work his brush on it, standing before his picture with his back to Deronda, who also felt himself at a break in his path, embarrassed by Hans's embarrassment.

Presently Hans said, again speaking low, and without turning, 'Excuse the question, but does Mrs Grandcourt know of all this?'

'No; and I must beg of you, Hans,' said Deronda, rather angrily, 'to cease joking on that subject. Any notions you have are wide of the truth – are the very reverse of the truth.'

'I am no more inclined to joke than I shall be at my own funeral,' said Hans. 'But I am not at all sure that you are aware what are my notions on that subject.'

'Perhaps not,' said Deronda. 'But let me say, once for all, that in relation to Mrs Grandcourt, I never have had, and never shall have, the position of a lover. If you have ever seriously put that interpretation on anything you have observed, you are supremely mistaken.'

There was silence a little while, and to each the silence was like an irritating air, exaggerating discomfort.

'Perhaps I have been mistaken in another interpretation also,' said Hans, presently.

'What is that?'

'That you had no wish to hold the position of a lover towards another woman, who is neither wife nor widow.'

'I can't pretend not to understand you, Meyrick. It is painful that our wishes should clash. But I hope you will tell me if you have any ground for supposing that you would succeed.'

'That seems rather a superfluous inquiry on your part, Deronda,' said Hans, with some irritation.

'Why superfluous?'

'Because you are perfectly convinced on the subject – and probably you have had the very best evidence to convince you.'

'I will be more frank with you than you are with me, said Deronda, still heated by Hans's show of temper, and yet sorry for him. 'I have never had the slightest evidence that I should succeed myself. In fact, I have very little hope.'

Hans looked round hastily at his friend, but immediately turned to his picture again.

'And in our present situation,' said Deronda, hurt by the idea that Hans suspected him of insincerity, and giving an offended emphasis to his words, 'I don't see how I can deliberately make known my feeling to her. If she could not return it, I should have embittered her best comfort, for neither she nor I can be parted from her brother, and we should have to meet continually. If I were to cause her that sort of pain by an unwilling betrayal of my feeling, I should be no better than a mischievous animal.'

'I don't know that I have ever betrayed *my* feeling, to her,' said Hans, as if he were vindicating himself.

'You mean that we are on a level; then, you have no reason to envy me.'

'Oh, not the slightest,' said Hans, with bitter irony. 'You have measured my conceit and know that it out-tops all your advantages.'

'I am a nuisance to you, Meyrick. I am sorry, but I can't help it,' said Deronda, rising. 'After what passed between us before, I wished to have this explanation; and I don't see that any pretensions of mine have made a real difference to you. They are not likely to make any pleasant difference to myself under present circumstances. Now the father is there – did you know that the father is there?'

'Yes. If he were not a Jew I would permit myself to damn him – with faint praise, I mean,' said Hans, but with no smile.

'She and I meet under greater constraint than ever. Things might go on in this way for two years without my getting any insight into her feeling towards me. That is the whole state of affairs, Hans. Neither you nor I have injured the other, that I can see. We must put up with this sort of rivalry in a hope that is likely enough to come to nothing. Our friendship can bear that strain, surely.'

'No, it can't,' said Hans, impetuously, throwing down his tools, thrusting his hands into his coat-pockets, and turning round to face Deronda, who drew back a little and looked at him with amazement. Hans went on in the same tone –

'Our friendship – my friendship – can't bear the strain of behaving to you like an ungrateful dastard and grudging you your happiness. For you *are* the happiest dog in the world. If Mirah loves anybody better than her brother, *you are the man*.'

Hans turned on his heel and threw himself into his chair, looking up at Deronda with an expression the reverse of tender. Something like a shock passed through Deronda, and, after an instant, he said –

'It is a good-natured fiction of yours, Hans.'

'I am not in a good-natured mood. I assure you I found the fact disagreeable when it was thrust on me – all the more, or perhaps all the less, because I believed then that your heart was pledged to the Duchess. But now, confound you! you turn out to be in love in the right place – a Jew – and everything eligible.'

'Tell me what convinced you – there's a good fellow,' said Deronda, distrusting a delight that he was unused to.

'Don't ask. Little mother was witness. The upshot is, that Mirah is jealous of the Duchess, and the sooner you relieve her mind, the better. There! I've cleared off a score or two, and may be allowed to swear at you for getting what you deserve – which is just the very best luck I know of.'

'God bless you, Hans!' said Deronda, putting out his hand, which the other took and wrung in silence.

Chapter Sixty-Eight

All thoughts, all passions, all delights,
  Whatever stirs this mortal frame,
All are but ministers of Love,
  And feed his sacred flame.

– COLERIDGE

Deronda's eagerness to confess his love could hardly have had a stronger stimulus than Hans had given it in his assurance that Mirah needed relief from jealousy. He went on his next visit to Ezra with the determination to be resolute in using – nay, in requesting – an opportunity of private conversation with her. If she accepted his love, he felt courageous about all other consequences, and as her betrothed husband he would gain a protective authority which might be a desirable defence for her in future difficulties with her father. Deronda had not observed any signs of growing restlessness in Lapidoth, or of diminished desire to recommend himself; but he had forebodings of some future struggle, some mortification, or some intolerable increase of domestic disquietude in which he might save Ezra and Mirah from being helpless victims.

His forebodings would have been strengthened if he had known what was going on in the father's mind. That amount of restlessness, that desultoriness of attention, which made a small torture to Ezra, was to Lapidoth an irksome submission to restraint, only made bearable by his thinking of it as a means of by-and-by securing a well-conditioned freedom. He began with the intention of awaiting some really good chance, such as an opening for getting a considerable sum from Deronda; but all the while he was looking about curiously, and trying to discover where Mirah deposited her money and her keys. The imperious gambling desire within him, which carried on its activity through every other occupation, and made a continuous web of imagination that held all else in its meshes, would hardly have been under the control of a protracted purpose, if he had been able to lay his hand on any sum worth capturing. But Mirah, with her practical clear-sightedness, guarded against any frustration of the promise she had given Ezra, by confiding all money, except what she was immediately in want of, to Mrs Meyrick's care, and Lapidoth felt himself under an irritating completeness of supply in kind as in a lunatic asylum where everything was made safe against him. To have opened a desk or drawer of Mirah's, and pocketed any bank-notes found there, would have been to his mind a sort of domestic appropriation which had no disgrace in it; the degrees of liberty a man allows himself with other people's property being often delicately drawn, even beyond the boundary where the law begins to lay its hold – which is the reason why spoons are a safer investment than mining shares. Lapidoth really felt himself injuriously treated by his daughter, and thought that he ought to have had what he wanted of her other earnings as he had of her apple-tart. But he remained submissive; indeed, the indiscretion that most tempted him, was not any insistence with Mirah, but some kind of appeal to Deronda. Clever persons who have nothing else to sell can often put a good price on their absence, and Lapidoth's difficult search for devices forced upon him the idea that his family would find themselves happier without him, and that Deronda would be willing to advance a considerable sum for the sake of getting rid of him. But, in spite of well-practised hardihood, Lapidoth was still in some awe of Ezra's imposing friend, and deferred his purpose indefinitely.

On this day, when Deronda had come full of a gladdened consciousness, which inevitably showed itself in his air and speech, Lapidoth was at a crisis of discontent and longing that made his mind busy with schemes of freedom, and Deronda's new amenity encouraged them. This preoccupation was at last so strong as to interfere with his usual show of interest in what went forward, and his persistence in sitting by even when there was reading which he could not follow. After sitting a little while, he went out to smoke and walk in the square, and the two friends were all the easier. Mirah was not at home, but she was sure to be in again before Deronda left, and his eyes glowed with a secret anticipation: he thought that when he saw her again he should see some sweetness of recognition for himself to which his eyes had been sealed before. There was an additional playful affectionateness in his manner towards Ezra.

'This little room is too close for you, Ezra,' he said, breaking off his reading. 'The week's heat we sometimes get here is worse than the heat in Genoa, where one sits in the shaded coolness of large rooms. You must have a better home now. I shall do as I like with you, being the stronger half.' He smiled toward Ezra, who said –

‘I am straitened for nothing except breath. But you, who might be in a spacious palace, with the wide green country around you, find this a narrow prison. Nevertheless, I cannot say, “Go.” ’

‘Oh, the country would be a banishment while you are here,’ said Deronda, rising and walking round the double room, which yet offered no long promenade, while he made a great fan of his handkerchief. ‘This is the happiest room in the world to me. Besides, I will imagine myself in the East, since I am getting ready to go there some day. Only I will not wear a cravat and a heavy ring there,’ he ended emphatically, pausing to take off those superfluities and deposit them on a small table behind Ezra, who had the table in front of him covered with books and papers.

‘I have been wearing my memorable ring ever since I came home,’ he went on, as he reseated himself. ‘But I am such a Sybarite that I constantly put it off as a burthen when I am doing anything. I understand why the Romans had summer rings – *if* they had them. Now then, I shall get on better.’

They were soon absorbed in their work again. Deronda was reading a piece of rabbinical Hebrew under Ezra’s correction and comment, and they took little notice when Lapidoth re-entered and seated himself somewhat in the background.

His rambling eyes quickly alighted on the ring that sparkled on the bit of dark mahogany. During his walk, his mind had been occupied with the fiction of an advantageous opening for him abroad, only requiring a sum of ready money, which, on being communicated to Deronda in private, might immediately draw from him a question as to the amount of the required sum; and it was this part of his forecast that Lapidoth found the most debateable, there being a danger in asking too much, and a prospective regret in asking too little. His own desire gave him no limit, and he was quite without guidance as to the limit of Deronda’s willingness. But now, in the midst of these airy conditions preparatory to a receipt which remained indefinite, this ring, which on Deronda’s finger had become familiar to Lapidoth’s envy, suddenly shone detached, and within easy grasp. Its value was certainly below the smallest of the imaginary sums that his purpose fluctuated between; but then it was before him as a solid fact, and his desire at once leaped into the thought (not yet an intention) that if he were quietly to pocket that ring and walk away he would have the means of comfortable escape from present restraint, without trouble, and also without danger; for any property of Deronda’s (available without his formal consent) was all one with his children’s property, since their father would never be prosecuted for taking it. The details of this thinking followed each other so quickly that they seemed to rise before him as one picture. Lapidoth had never committed larceny; but larceny is a form of appropriation for which people are punished by law; and to take this ring from a virtual relation, who would have been willing to make a much heavier gift, would not come under the head of larceny. Still, the heavier gift was to be preferred, if Lapidoth could only make haste enough in asking for it, and the imaginary action of taking the ring, which kept repeating itself like an inward tune, sank into a rejected idea. He satisfied his urgent longing by resolving to go below, and watch for the moment of Deronda’s departure, when he would ask leave to join him in his walk, and boldly carry out his meditated plan. He rose and stood looking out of the window, but all the while he saw what lay behind him – the brief passage he would have to make to the door close by the table where the ring was. However, he was resolved to go down; but – by no distinct change of resolution, rather by a dominance of desire, like the thirst of the drunkard – it so happened that in passing the table his fingers fell noiselessly on the ring, and he found himself in the passage with the ring in his hand. It followed that he put on his hat and quitted the house. The possibility of again throwing himself on his children receded into the indefinite distance, and before he was out of the square his sense of haste had concentrated itself on selling the ring and getting on shipboard.

Deronda and Ezra were just aware of his exit; that was all. But, by-and-by, Mirah came in and made a real interruption. She had not taken off her hat; and when Deronda rose and advanced to shake hands with her, she said, in a confusion at once unaccountable and troublesome to herself –

‘I only came in to see that Ezra had his new draught. I must go directly to Mrs Meyrick’s to fetch something.’

‘Pray allow me to walk with you,’ said Deronda, urgently. ‘I must not tire Ezra any further; besides, my brains are melting. I want to go to Mrs Meyrick’s: may I go with you?’

‘Oh yes,’ said Mirah, blushing still more, with the vague sense of something new in Deronda, and turning away to pour out Ezra’s draught; Ezra meanwhile throwing back his head with his eyes shut, unable to get his mind away from the ideas that had been filling it while the reading was going on. Deronda for a moment stood thinking of nothing but the walk, till Mirah turned round again and brought the draught, when he suddenly remembered that he had laid aside his cravat, and saying – ‘Pray excuse my dishabille – I did not mean you to see it,’ he went to the little table, took up his cravat, and exclaimed with a violent impulse of surprise, ‘Good heavens! where is my ring gone?’ beginning to search about on the floor.

Ezra looked round the corner of his chair. Mirah, quick as thought, went to the spot where Deronda was seeking, and said, ‘Did you lay it down?’

‘Yes,’ said Deronda, still unvisited by any other explanation than that the ring had fallen and was lurking in shadow, indiscernible on the variegated carpet. He was moving the bits of furniture near, and searching in all possible and impossible places with hand and eyes.

But another explanation had visited Mirah and taken the colour from her cheek. She went to Ezra’s ear and whispered, ‘Was my father here?’ He bent his head in reply, meeting her eyes with terrible understanding. She darted back to the spot where Deronda was still casting down his eyes in that hopeless exploration which we are apt to carry on over a space we have examined in vain. ‘You have not found it?’ she said, hurriedly.

He, meeting her frightened gaze, immediately caught alarm from it and answered, ‘I perhaps put it in my pocket,’ professing to feel for it there.

She watched him and said, ‘It is not there? – you put it on the table,’ with a penetrating voice that would not let him feign to have found it in his pocket; and immediately she rushed out of the room. Deronda followed her – she was gone into the sitting-room below to look for her father – she opened the door of the bedroom to see if he were there – she looked where his hat usually hung – she turned with her hands clasped tight and her lips pale, gazing despairingly out of the window. Then she looked up at Deronda who had not dared to speak to her in her white agitation. She looked up at him, unable to utter a word – the look seemed a tacit acceptance of the humiliation she felt in his presence. But he, taking her clasped hands between both his, said, in a tone of reverent adoration –

‘Mirah, let me think that he is my father as well as yours – that we can have no sorrow, no disgrace, no joy apart. I will rather take your grief to be mine than I would take the brightest joy of another woman. Say you will not reject me – say you will take me to share all things with you. Say you will promise to be my wife – say it now. I have been in doubt so long – I have had to hide my love so long. Say that now and always I may prove to you that I love you with complete love.’

The change in Mirah had been gradual. She had not passed at once from anguish to the full, blessed consciousness that, in this moment of grief and shame, Deronda was giving her the highest tribute man can give to woman. With the first tones and the first words, she had only a sense of solemn comfort, referring this goodness of Deronda’s to his feeling for Ezra. But by degrees the rapturous assurance of unhoped-for good took possession of her frame; her face glowed under Deronda’s as he bent over her; yet she looked up still with intense gravity, as when she had first acknowledged with religious gratitude that he had thought her ‘worthy of the best;’ and when he had finished, she could say nothing – she could only lift up her lips to his and just kiss them, as if that were the simplest ‘yes.’ They stood then, only looking at each other, he holding her hands between his – too happy to move, meeting so fully in their new consciousness that all signs would have seemed to throw them farther apart, till Mirah said in a whisper: ‘Let us go and comfort Ezra.’

Chapter Sixty-Nine

> The human nature unto which I felt
> That I belonged, and reverenced with love,
> Was not a punctual presence, but a spirit
> Diffused through time and space, with aid derived
> Of evidence from monuments, erect,
> Prostrate, or leaning towards their common rest
> In earth, the widely scattered wreck sublime
> Of vanished nations.
>
> – WORDSWORTH: *The Prelude*

Sir Hugo carried out his plan of spending part of the autumn at Diplow, and by the beginning of October his presence was spreading some cheerfulness in the neighbourhood, among all ranks and persons concerned, from the stately homes of Brackenshaw and Quetcham to the respectable shop-parlours in Wanchester. For Sir Hugo was a man who liked to show himself and be affable, a Liberal of good lineage, who confided entirely in Reform as not likely to make any serious difference in English habits of feeling, one of which undoubtedly is the liking to behold society well fenced and adorned with hereditary rank. Hence he made Diplow a most agreeable house, extending his invitations to old Wanchester solicitors and young village curates, but also taking some care in the combination of his guests, and not feeding all the common poultry together, so that they should think their meal no particular compliment. Easy-going Lord Brackenshaw, for example, would not mind meeting Robinson the attorney, but Robinson would have been naturally piqued if he had been asked to meet a set of people who passed for his equals. On all these points Sir Hugo was well informed enough at once to gain popularity for himself and give pleasure to others – two results which eminently suited his disposition. The Rector of Pennicote now found a reception at Diplow very different from the haughty tolerance he had undergone during the reign of Grandcourt. It was not only that the baronet liked Mr Gascoigne, it was that he desired to keep up a marked relation of friendliness with him on account of Mrs Grandcourt, for whom Sir Hugo's chivalry had become more and more engaged. Why? The chief reason was one that he could not fully communicate, even to Lady Mallinger – for he would not tell what he thought one woman's secret to another, even though the other was his wife – which shows that his chivalry included a rare reticence.

Deronda, after he had become engaged to Mirah, felt it right to make a full statement of his position and purposes to Sir Hugo, and he chose to make it by letter. He had more than a presentiment that his fatherly friend would feel some dissatisfaction, if not pain, at this turn of his destiny. In reading unwelcome news, instead of hearing it, there is the advantage that one avoids a hasty expression of impatience which may afterwards be repented of. Deronda dreaded that verbal collision which makes otherwise pardonable feeling lastingly offensive.

And Sir Hugo, though not altogether surprised, was thoroughly vexed. His immediate resource was to take the letter to Lady Mallinger, who would be sure to express an astonishment which her husband could argue against as unreasonable, and in this way divide the stress of his discontent. And in fact when she showed herself astonished and distressed that all Daniel's wonderful talents, and the comfort of having him in the house, should have ended in his going mad in this way about the Jews, the baronet could say –

'Oh, nonsense, my dear! depend upon it, Dan will not make a fool of himself. He has large notions about Judaism – political views which you can't understand. No fear but Dan will keep himself head uppermost.'

But with regard to the prospective marriage, she afforded him no counter-irritant. The gentle lady observed, without rancour, that she had little dreamed of what was coming when she had Mirah to sing at her musical party and give lessons to Amabel. After some hesitation, indeed, she confessed it *had* passed through her mind that after a proper time Daniel might marry Mrs Grandcourt – because it seemed so remarkable that he should be at Genoa just at that time – and although she herself was not fond of widows she could not help thinking that such a marriage would have been better than his going altogether with the Jews.

But Sir Hugo was so strongly of the same opinion that he could not correct it as a feminine mistake; and his ill-humour at the disproof of his agreeable conclusions on behalf of Gwendolen was left without vent. He desired Lady Mallinger not to breathe a word about the affair till further notice, saying to himself, 'If it is an

unkind cut to the poor thing' (meaning Gwendolen), 'the longer she is without knowing it the better, in her present nervous state. And she will best learn it from Dan himself.' Sir Hugo's conjectures had worked so industriously with his knowledge, that he fancied himself well informed concerning the whole situation.

Meanwhile his residence with his family at Diplow enabled him to continue his fatherly attentions to Gwendolen; and in these Lady Mallinger, notwithstanding her small liking for widows, was quite willing to second him.

The plan of removal to Offendene had been carried out; and Gwendolen, in settling there, maintained a calm beyond her mother's hopes. She was experiencing some of that peaceful melancholy which comes from the renunciation of demands for self, and from taking the ordinary good of existence, and especially kindness, even from a dog, as a gift above expectation. Does one who has been all but lost in a pit of darkness complain of the sweet air and the daylight? There is a way of looking at our life daily as an escape, and taking the quiet return of morn and evening – still more the starlike out-glowing of some pure fellow-feeling, some generous impulse breaking our inward darkness – as a salvation that reconciles us to hardship. Those who have a self-knowledge prompting such self-accusation as Hamlet's, can understand this habitual feeling of rescue. And it was felt by Gwendolen as she lived through and through again the terrible history of her temptations, from their first form of illusory self-pleasing when she struggled away from the hold of conscience, to their latest form of an urgent hatred dragging her towards its satisfaction, while she prayed and cried for the help of that conscience which she had once forsaken. She was now dwelling on every word of Deronda's that pointed to her past deliverance from the worst evil in herself and the worst infliction of it on others, and on every word that carried a force to resist self-despair.

But she was also upborne by the prospect of soon seeing him again: she did not imagine him otherwise than always within her reach, her supreme need of him blinding her to the separateness of his life, the whole scene of which she filled with his relation to her – no unique preoccupation of Gwendolen's, for we are all apt to fall into this passionate egoism of imagination, not only towards our fellow-men, but towards God. And the future which she turned her face to with a willing step was one where she would be continually assimilating herself to some type that he would hold before her. Had he not first risen on her vision as a corrective presence which she had recognised in the beginning with resentment, and at last with entire love and trust? She could not spontaneously think of an end to that reliance, which had become to her imagination like the firmness of the earth, the only condition of her walking.

And Deronda was not long before he came to Diplow, which was at a more convenient distance from town than the Abbey. He had wished to carry out a plan for taking Ezra and Mirah to a mild spot on the coast, while he prepared another home that Mirah might enter as his bride, and where they might unitedly watch over her brother. But Ezra begged not to be removed, unless it were to go with them to the East. All outward solicitations were becoming more and more of a burthen to him; but his mind dwelt on the possibility of this voyage with a visionary joy. Deronda in his preparations for the marriage, which he hoped might not be deferred beyond a couple of months, wished to have fuller consultation as to his resources and affairs generally with Sir Hugo, and here was a reason for not delaying his visit to Diplow. But he thought quite as much of another reason – his promise to Gwendolen. The sense of blessedness in his own lot had yet an aching anxiety at its heart: this may be held paradoxical, for the beloved lover is always called happy, and happiness is considered as a well-fleshed indifference to sorrow outside it. But human experience is usually paradoxical, if that means incongruous with the phrases of current talk or even current philosophy. It was no treason to Mirah, but a part of that full nature which made his love for her the more worthy, that his joy in her could hold by its side the care for another. For what is love itself, for the one we love best? – an enfolding of immeasurable cares which yet are better than any joys outside our love.

Deronda came twice to Diplow, and saw Gwendolen twice – and yet he went back to town without having told her anything about the change in his lot and prospects. He blamed himself; but in all momentous communication likely to give pain we feel dependent on some preparatory turn of words or associations, some agreement of the other's mood with the probable effect of what we have to impart. In the first interview Gwendolen was so absorbed in what she had to say to him, so full of questions which he must answer, about the arrangement of her life, what she could do to make herself less ignorant, how she could be kindest to everybody, and make amends for her selfishness and try to be rid of it, that Deronda utterly shrank from waiving her immediate wants in order to speak of himself, nay, from inflicting a wound on her in these moments when she was leaning on him for help in her path. In the second interview, when he went with new resolve to command the conversation into some preparatory track, he found her in a state of deep depression, overmastered by those distasteful miserable memories which forced themselves on her as something more real and ample than any new material out of which she could mould her future. She cried hysterically, and said that he would always despise her. He could only seek words of soothing and encouragement; and when she gradually revived under them, with that pathetic look of renewed childlike interest which we see in eyes

where the lashes are still beaded with tears, it was impossible to lay another burthen on her.

But time went on, and he felt it a pressing duty to make the difficult disclosure. Gwendolen, it was true, never recognised his having any affairs; and it had never even occurred to her to ask him why he happened to be at Genoa. But this unconsciousness of hers would make a sudden revelation of affairs that were determining his course in life all the heavier blow to her; and if he left the revelation to be made by indifferent persons, she would feel that he had treated her with cruel inconsiderateness. He could not make the communication in writing: his tenderness could not bear to think of her reading his virtual farewell in solitude, and perhaps feeling his words full of a hard gladness for himself and indifference for her. He went down to Diplow again, feeling that every other peril was to be incurred rather than that of returning and leaving her still in ignorance.

On this third visit Deronda found Hans Meyrick installed with his easel at Diplow, beginning his picture of the three daughters sitting on a bank 'in the Gainsborough style,' and varying his work by rambling to Pennicote to sketch the village children and improve his acquaintance with the Gascoignes. Hans appeared to have recovered his vivacity, but Deronda detected some feigning in it, as we detect the artificiality of a lady's bloom from its being a little too high-toned and steadily persistent (a 'Fluctuating Rouge' not having yet appeared among the advertisements). Also, with all his grateful friendship and admiration for Deronda, Hans could not help a certain irritation against him such as extremely incautious, open natures are apt to feel when the breaking of a friend's reserve discloses a state of things not merely unsuspected but the reverse of what had been hoped and ingeniously conjectured. It is true that poor Hans had always cared chiefly to confide in Deronda, and had been quite incurious as to any confidence that might have been given in return; but what outpourer of his own affairs is not tempted to think any hint of his friend's affairs as an egoistic irrelevance? That was no reason why it was not rather a sore reflection to Hans that while he had been all along naïvely opening his heart about Mirah, Deronda had kept secret a feeling of rivalry which now revealed itself as the important determining fact. Moreover, it is always at their peril that our friends turn out to be something more than we were aware of. Hans must be excused for these promptings of bruised sensibility, since he had not allowed them to govern his substantial conduct: he had the consciousness of having done right by his fortunate friend; or, as he told himself, 'his metal had given a better ring than he would have sworn to beforehand.' For Hans had always said that in point of virtue he was a *dilettante*: which meant that he was very fond of it in other people, but if he meddled with it himself he cut a poor figure. Perhaps in reward of his good behaviour he gave his tongue the more freedom; and he was too fully possessed by the notion of Deronda's happiness to have a conception of what he was feeling about Gwendolen, so that he spoke of her without hesitation.

'When did you come down, Hans?' said Deronda, joining him in the grounds where he was making a study of the requisite bank and trees.

'Oh, ten days ago – before the time Sir Hugo fixed. I ran down with Rex Gascoigne and stayed at the Rectory a day or two. I'm up in all the gossip of these parts – I know the state of the wheelwright's interior, and have assisted at an infant school examination. Sister Anna with the good upper lip escorted me, else I should have been mobbed by three urchins and an idiot, because of my long hair and a general appearance which departs from the Pennicote type of the beautiful. Altogether, the village is idyllic. Its only fault is a dark curate with broad shoulders and broad trousers who ought to have gone into the heavy drapery line. The Gascoignes are perfect – besides being related to the Vandyke duchess. I caught a glimpse of her in her black robes at a distance, though she doesn't show to visitors.'

'She was not staying at the Rectory?' said Deronda.

'No; but I was taken to Offendene to see the old house, and as a consequence I saw the duchess's family. I suppose you have been there and know all about them?'

'Yes, I have been there,' said Deronda, quietly.

'A fine old place. An excellent setting for a widow with romantic fortunes. And she seems to have had several romances. I think I have found out that there was one between her and my friend Rex.'

'Not long before her marriage, then?' said Deronda, really interested; 'for they had only been a year at Offendene. How came you to know anything of it?'

'Oh – not ignorant of what it is to be a miserable devil, I learn to gloat on the signs of misery in others. I found out that Rex never goes to Offendene, and has never seen the duchess since she came back; and Miss Gascoigne let fall something in our talk about charade-acting – for I went through some of my nonsense to please the young ones – something which proved to me that Rex was once hovering about his fair cousin close enough to get singed. I don't know what was her part in the affair. Perhaps the duke came in and carried her off. That is always the way when an exceptionally worthy young man forms an attachment. I understand now why Gascoigne talks of making the law his mistress and remaining a bachelor. But these are green resolves. Since the duke did not get himself drowned for your sake, it may turn out to be for my friend Rex's sake. Who

knows?'

'Is it absolutely necessary that Mrs Grandcourt should marry again?' said Deronda, ready to add that Hans's success in constructing her fortunes hitherto had not been enough to warrant a new attempt.

'You monster!' retorted Hans, 'do you want her to wear weeds for *you* all her life – burn herself in perpetual suttee while you are alive and merry?'

Deronda could say nothing, but he looked so much annoyed that Hans turned the current of his chat, and when he was alone shrugged his shoulders a little over the thought that there really had been some stronger feeling between Deronda and the duchess than Mirah would like to know of. 'Why didn't she fall in love with me?' thought Hans, laughing at himself. 'She would have had no rivals. No woman ever wanted to discuss theology with me.'

No wonder that Deronda winced under that sort of joking with a whip-lash. It touched sensibilities that were already quivering with the anticipation of witnessing some of that pain to which even Hans's light words seemed to give more reality – any sort of recognition by another giving emphasis to the subject of our anxiety. And now he had come down with the firm resolve that he would not again evade the trial. The next day he rode to Offendene. He had sent word that he intended to call and to ask if Gwendolen could receive him; and he found her awaiting him in the old drawing-room where some chief crises of her life had happened. She seemed less sad than he had seen her since her husband's death; there was no smile on her face, but a placid self-possession, in contrast with the mood in which he had last found her. She was all the more alive to the sadness perceptible in Deronda; and they were no sooner seated – he at a little distance opposite to her – than she said:

'You were afraid of coming to see me, because I was so full of grief and despair the last time. But I am not so to-day. I have been sorry ever since. I have been making it a reason why I should keep up my hope and be as cheerful as I can, because I would not give you any pain about me.'

There was an unwonted sweetness in Gwendolen's tone and look as she uttered these words that seemed to Deronda to infuse the utmost cruelty into the task now laid upon him. But he felt obliged to make his answer a beginning of the task.

'I *am* in some trouble to-day,' he said, looking at her rather mournfully; 'but it is because I have things to tell you which you will almost think it a want of confidence on my part not to have spoken of before. They are things affecting my own life – my own future. I shall seem to have made an ill return to you for the trust you have placed in me – never to have given you an idea of events that make great changes for me. But when we have been together we have hardly had time to enter into subjects which at the moment were really less pressing to me than the trials you have been going through.' There was a sort of timid tenderness in Deronda's deep tones, and he paused with a pleading look, as if it had been Gwendolen only who had conferred anything in her scenes of beseeching and confession.

A thrill of surprise was visible in her. Such meaning as she found in his words had shaken her, but without causing fear. Her mind had flown at once to some change in his position with regard to Sir Hugo and Sir Hugo's property. She said, with a sense of comfort from Deronda's way of asking her pardon –

'You never thought of anything but what you could do to help me; and I was so troublesome. How could you tell me things?'

'It will perhaps astonish you,' said Deronda, 'that I have only quite lately known who were my parents.'

Gwendolen was not astonished: she felt the more assured that her expectations of what was coming were right. Deronda went on without check.

'The reason why you found me in Italy was that I had gone there to learn that – in fact, to meet my mother. It was by her wish that I was brought up in ignorance of my parentage. She parted with me after my father's death, when I was a little creature. But she is now very ill, and she felt that the secrecy ought not to be any longer maintained. Her chief reason had been that she did not wish me to know I was a Jew.'

'A *Jew*!' Gwendolen exclaimed, in a low tone of amazement, with an utterly frustrated look, as if some confusing potion were creeping through her system.

Deronda coloured and did not speak, while Gwendolen, with her eyes fixed on the floor, was struggling to find her way in the dark by the aid of various reminiscences. She seemed at last to have arrived at some judgment, for she looked up at Deronda again and said, as if remonstrating against the mother's conduct –

'What difference need that have made?'

'It has made a great difference to me that I have known it,' said Deronda, emphatically; but he could not go on easily – the distance between her ideas and his acted like a difference of native language, making him uncertain what force his words would carry.

Gwendolen meditated again, and then said feelingly, 'I hope there is nothing to make you mind. *You* are just the same as if you were not a Jew.'

She meant to assure him that nothing of that external sort could affect the way in which she regarded him,

or the way in which he could influence her. Deronda was a little helped by this misunderstanding.

'The discovery was far from being painful to me,' he said. 'I had been gradually prepared for it, and I was glad of it. I had been prepared for it by becoming intimate with a very remarkable Jew, whose ideas have attracted me so much that I think of devoting the best part of my life to some effort at giving them effect.'

Again Gwendolen seemed shaken – again there was a look of frustration, but this time it was mingled with alarm. She looked at Deronda with lips childishly parted. It was not that she had yet connected his words with Mirah and her brother, but that they had inspired her with a dreadful presentiment of mountainous travel for her mind before it could reach Deronda's. Great ideas in general which she had attributed to him seemed to make no great practical difference, and were not formidable in the same way as these mysteriously-shadowed particular ideas. He could not quite divine what was going on within her; he could only seek the least abrupt path of disclosure.

'That is an object,' he said, after a moment, 'which will by-and-by force me to leave England for some time – for some years. I have purposes which will take me to the East.'

Here was something clearer, but all the more immediately agitating. Gwendolen's lip began to tremble. 'But you will come back?' she said, tasting her own tears as they fell, before she thought of drying them.

Deronda could not sit still. He rose, and went to prop himself against the corner of the mantelpiece, at a different angle from her face. But when she had pressed her handkerchief against her cheeks, she turned and looked up at him, awaiting an answer.

'If I live,' said Deronda – '*some time*.'

They were both silent. He could not persuade himself to say more unless she led up to it by a question; and she was apparently meditating something that she had to say.

'What are you going to do?' she asked, at last, very timidly. 'Can I understand the ideas, or am I too ignorant?'

'I am going to the East to become better acquainted with the condition of my race in various countries there,' said Deronda, gently – anxious to be as explanatory as he could on what was the impersonal part of their separateness from each other. 'The idea that I am possessed with is that of restoring a political existence to my people, making them a nation again, giving them a national centre, such as the English have, though they too are scattered over the face of the globe. That is a task which presents itself to me as a duty: I am resolved to begin it, however feebly. I am resolved to devote my life to it. At the least, I may awaken a movement in other minds, such as has been awakened in my own.'

There was a long silence between them. The world seemed getting larger round poor Gwendolen, and she more solitary and helpless in the midst. The thought that he might come back after going to the East, sank before the bewildering vision of these wide-stretching purposes in which she felt herself reduced to a mere speck. There comes a terrible moment to many souls when the great movements of the world, the larger destinies of mankind, which have lain aloof in newspapers and other neglected reading, enter like an earthquake into their own lives – when the slow urgency of growing generations turns into the tread of an invading army or the dire clash of civil war, and grey fathers know nothing to seek for but the corpses of their blooming sons, and girls forget all vanity to make lint and bandages which may serve for the shattered limbs of their betrothed husbands. Then it is as if the Invisible Power that has been the object of lip-worship and lip-resignation became visible, according to the imagery of the Hebrew poet, making the flames his chariot, and riding on the wings of the wind, till the mountains smoke and the plains shudder under the rolling fiery visitation. Often the good cause seems to lie prostrate under the thunder of unrelenting force, the martyrs live reviled, they die, and no angel is seen holding forth the crown and the palm branch. Then it is that the submission of the soul to the Highest is tested, and even in the eyes of frivolity life looks out from the scene of human struggle with the awful face of duty, and a religion shows itself which is something else than a private consolation.

That was the sort of crisis which was at this moment beginning in Gwendolen's small life: she was for the first time feeling the pressure of a vast mysterious movement, for the first time being dislodged from her supremacy in her own world, and getting a sense that her horizon was but a dipping onward of an existence with which her own was revolving. All the troubles of her wifehood and widowhood had still left her with the implicit impression which had accompanied her from childhood, that whatever surrounded her was somehow specially for her, and it was because of this that no personal jealousy had been roused in her in relation to Deronda: she could not spontaneously think of him as rightfully belonging to others more than to her. But here had come a shock which went deeper than personal jealousy – something spiritual and vaguely tremendous that thrust her away, and yet quelled all anger into self-humiliation.

There had been a long silence. Deronda had stood still, even thankful for an interval before he needed to say more, and Gwendolen had sat like a statue with her wrists lying over each other and her eyes fixed – the intensity of her mental action arresting all other excitation. At length something occurred to her that made

her turn her face to Deronda and say in a trembling voice –

'Is that all you can tell me?'

The question was like a dart to him. 'The Jew whom I mentioned just now,' he answered, not without a certain tremor in his tones too, 'the remarkable man who has greatly influenced my mind, has not perhaps been totally unheard of by you. He is the brother of Miss Lapidoth, whom you have often heard sing.'

A great wave of remembrance passed through Gwendolen and spread as a deep, painful flush over face and neck. It had come first as the scene of that morning when she had called on Mirah, and heard Deronda's voice reading, and been told, without then heeding it, that he was reading Hebrew with Mirah's brother.

'He is very ill – very near death now,' Deronda went on, nervously, and then stopped short. He felt that he must wait. Would she divine the rest?

'Did she tell you that I went to her?' said Gwendolen, abruptly, looking up at him.

'No,' said Deronda. 'I don't understand you.'

She turned away her eyes again, and sat thinking. Slowly the colour died out of face and neck, and she was as pale as before – with that almost withered paleness which is seen after a painful flush. At last she said, without turning towards him – in a low, measured voice, as if she were only thinking aloud in preparation for future speech –

'But *can* you marry?'

'Yes,' said Deronda, also in a low voice. 'I am going to marry.'

At first there was no change in Gwendolen's attitude: she only began to tremble visibly; then she looked before her with dilated eyes, as at something lying in front of her, till she stretched her arms out straight, and cried with a smothered voice –

'I said I should be forsaken. I have been a cruel woman. And I am forsaken.'

Deronda's anguish was intolerable. He could not help himself. He seized her outstretched hands and held them together, and kneeled at her feet. She was the victim of his happiness.

'I am cruel too, I am cruel,' he repeated, with a sort of groan, looking up at her imploringly.

His presence and touch seemed to dispel a horrible vision, and she met his upward look of sorrow with something like the return of consciousness after fainting. Then she dwelt on it with that growing pathetic movement of the brow which accompanies the revival of some tender recollection. The look of sorrow brought back what seemed a very far-off moment – the first time she had ever seen it, in the library at the Abbey. Sobs rose, and great tears fell fast. Deronda would not let her hands go – held them still with one of his, and himself pressed her handkerchief against her eyes. She submitted like a half-soothed child, making an effort to speak, which was hindered by struggling sobs. At last she succeeded in saying brokenly –

'I said … I said … it should be better … better with me … for having known you.'

His eyes too were larger with tears. She wrested one of her hands from his, and returned his action, pressing his tears away.

'We shall not be quite parted,' he said. 'I will write to you always, when I can, and you will answer?'

He waited till she said in a whisper, 'I will try.'

'I shall be more with you than I used to be,' Deronda said with gentle urgency, releasing her hands and rising from his kneeling posture. 'If we had been much together before, we should have felt our differences more, and seemed to get farther apart. Now we can perhaps never see each other again. But our minds may get nearer.'

Gwendolen said nothing, but rose too, automatically. Her withered look of grief, such as the sun often shines on when the blinds are drawn up after the burial of life's joy, made him hate his own words: they seemed to have the hardness of easy consolation in them. She felt that he was going, and that nothing could hinder it. The sense of it was like a dreadful whisper in her ear, which dulled all other consciousness; and she had not known that she was rising.

Deronda could not speak again. He thought that they must part in silence, but it was difficult to move towards the parting, till she looked at him with a sort of intention in her eyes, which helped him. He advanced to put out his hand silently, and when she had placed hers within it, she said what her mind had been labouring with –

'You have been very good to me. I have deserved nothing. I will try – try to live. I shall think of you. What good have I been? Only harm. Don't let me be harm to *you*. It shall be the better for me—'

She could not finish. It was not that she was sobbing, but that the intense effort with which she spoke made her too tremulous. The burthen of that difficult rectitude towards him was a weight her frame tottered under.

She bent forward to kiss his cheek, and he kissed hers. Then they looked at each other for an instant with clasped hands, and he turned away.

When he was quite gone, her mother came in and found her sitting motionless.

‘Gwendolen, dearest, you look very ill,’ she said, bending over her and touching her cold hands.

‘Yes, mamma. But don’t be afraid. I am going to live,’ said Gwendolen, bursting out hysterically.

Her mother persuaded her to go to bed, and watched by her. Through the day and half the night she fell continually into fits of shrieking, but cried in the midst of them to her mother, ‘Don’t be afraid. I shall live. I mean to live.’

After all, she slept; and when she waked in the morning light, she looked up fixedly at her mother and said tenderly, ‘Ah, poor mamma! You have been sitting up with me. Don’t be unhappy. I shall live. I shall be better.’

Chapter Seventy

> In the chequered area of human experience the seasons are all mingled as in the golden age: fruit and blossom hang together: in the same moment the sickle is reaping and the seed is sprinkled; one tends the green cluster and another treads the wine-press. Nay, in each of our lives harvest and spring-time are continually one, until Death himself gathers us and sows us anew in his invisible fields.

Among the blessings of love there is hardly one more exquisite than the sense that in uniting the beloved life to ours we can watch over its happiness, bring comfort where hardship was, and over memories of privation and suffering open the sweetest fountains of joy. Deronda's love for Mirah was strongly imbued with that blessed protectiveness. Even with infantine feet she had begun to tread among thorns; and the first time he had beheld her face it had seemed to him the girlish image of despair.

But now she was glowing like a dark-tipped yet delicate ivorytinted flower in the warm sunlight of content, thinking of any possible grief as part of that life with Deronda which she could call by no other name than good. And he watched the sober gladness which gave new beauty to her movements and her habitual attitudes of repose, with a delight which made him say to himself that it was enough of personal joy for him to save her from pain. She knew nothing of Hans's struggle or of Gwendolen's pang; for after the assurance that Deronda's hidden love had been for her, she easily explained Gwendolen's eager solicitude about him as part of a grateful dependence on his goodness, such as she herself had known. And all Deronda's words about Mrs Grandcourt confirmed that view of their relation, though he never touched on it except in the most distant manner. Mirah was ready to believe that he had been a rescuing angel to many besides herself. The only wonder was, that she among them all was to have the bliss of being continually by his side.

So, when the bridal veil was around Mirah it hid no doubtful tremors – only a thrill of awe at the acceptance of a great gift which required great uses. And the velvet canopy never covered a more goodly bride and bridegroom, to whom their people might more wisely wish offspring; more truthful lips never touched the sacramental marriage-wine; the marriage-blessing never gathered stronger promise of fulfilment than in the integrity of their mutual pledge. Naturally, they were married according to the Jewish rite. And since no religion seems yet to have demanded that when we make a feast we should invite only the highest rank of our acquaintances, few, it is to be hoped, will be offended to learn that among the guests at Deronda's little wedding-feast was the entire Cohen family, with the one exception of the baby who carried on her teething intelligently at home. How could Mordecai have borne that those friends of his adversity should have been shut out from rejoicing in common with him?

Mrs Meyrick so fully understood this that she had quite reconciled herself to meeting the Jewish pawnbroker, and was there with her three daughters – all of them enjoying the consciousness that Mirah's marriage to Deronda crowned a romance which would always make a sweet memory to them. For which of them, mother or girls, had not had a generous part in it – giving their best in feeling and in act to her who needed? If Hans could have been there, it would have been better; but Mab had already observed that men must suffer for being so inconvenient: suppose she, Kate, and Amy had all fallen in love with Mr Deronda? – but being women, they were not so ridiculous.

The Meyricks were rewarded for conquering their prejudices by hearing a speech from Mr Cohen, which had the rare quality among speeches of not being quite after the usual pattern. Jacob ate beyond his years; and contributed several small whinnying laughs as a free accompaniment of his father's speech, not irreverently, but from a lively sense that his family was distinguishing itself; while Adelaide Rebekah, in a new Sabbath frock, maintained throughout a grave air of responsibility.

Mordecai's brilliant eyes, sunken in their large sockets, dwelt on the scene with the cherishing benignancy of a spirit already lifted into an aloofness which nullified only selfish requirements and left sympathy alive. But continually, after his gaze had been travelling round on the others, it returned to dwell on Deronda with a fresh gleam of trusting affection.

The wedding-feast was humble, but Mirah was not without splendid wedding-gifts. As soon as the bethrothal had been known, there were friends who had entertained graceful devices. Sir Hugo and Lady Mallinger had taken trouble to provide a complete equipment for Eastern travel, as well as a precious locket containing an inscription – '*To the bride of our dear Daniel Deronda all blessings. – H. & L.M.*' The Klesmers sent

a perfect watch, also with a pretty inscription.

But something more precious than gold and gems came to Deronda from the neighbourhood of Diplow on the morning of his marriage. It was a letter containing these words: –

> *Do not think of me sorrowfully on your wedding-day. I have remembered your words – that I may live to be one of the best of women, who make others glad that they were born. I do not yet see how that can be, but you know better than I. If it ever comes true, it will be because you helped me. I only thought of myself, and I made you grieve. It hurts me now to think of your grief. You must not grieve any more for me. It is better – it shall be better with me because I have known you.*
>
> Gwendolen Grandcourt

The preparations for the departure of all three to the East began at once; for Deronda could not deny Ezra's wish that they should set out on the voyage forthwith, so that he might go with them, instead of detaining them to watch over him. He had no belief that Ezra's life would last through the voyage, for there were symptoms which seemed to show that the last stage of his malady had set in. But Ezra himself had said, 'Never mind where I die, so that I am with you.'

He did not set out with them. One morning early he said to Deronda, 'Do not quit me to-day. I shall die before it is ended.'

He chose to be dressed and sit up in his easy-chair as usual, Deronda and Mirah on each side of him, and for some hours he was unusually silent, not even making the effort to speak, but looking at them occasionally with eyes full of some restful meaning, as if to assure them that while this remnant of breathing-time was difficult, he felt an ocean of peace beneath him.

It was not till late in the afternoon, when the light was falling, that he took a hand of each in his and said, looking at Deronda, 'Death is coming to me as the divine kiss which is both parting and reunion – which takes me from your bodily eyes and gives me full presence in your soul. Where thou goest, Daniel, I shall go. Is it not begun? Have I not breathed my soul into you? We shall live together.'

He paused, and Deronda waited, thinking that there might be another word for him. But slowly and with effort Ezra, pressing on their hands, raised himself and uttered in Hebrew the confession of the divine Unity, which for long generations has been on the lips of the dying Israelite.

He sank back gently into his chair, and did not speak again. But it was some hours before he had ceased to breathe, with Mirah's and Deronda's arms around him.

> 'Nothing is here for tears, nothing to wail
> Or knock the breast; no weakness, no contempt,
> Dispraise, or blame; nothing but well and fair,
> And what may quiet us in a death so noble.'

End Notes

1. ‘Gorgibus: “I tell you that marriage is a holy and hallowed state, and that to begin by proposing marriage is the right way for a gentleman to behave.” Madelon: “Heavens! If everyone was like you, a novel wouldn’t last long! It would be a fine thing if Cyrus started out by marrying Mandane and Aronce wedded Clélie without further ado! … Allow us to weave the plot of our novel at our leisure, and don’t try to rush the conclusion.” ’
2. ‘My powers are weak, though my desire is strong.’
3. ‘Do you really believe you have humiliated me by telling me that the earth turns round the sun? I assure you that my self-esteem remains intact.’
4. ‘You’ll be happy, my dear’; ‘Yes, mamma, just like you’.
5. Changes his clothes.
6. ‘There is no greater pain than to remember times of happiness in times of misery.’
7. ‘like a fist in my eye.’
8. ‘I loved you once, I love you still.’
9. ‘We all grow worse if we are given to much licence.’
10. ‘It is easier to know man in general than one man in particular.’
11. Not so easy to get hold of.
12. ‘He is called Israel. A witch’s curse has transformed him into a dog … But every Friday evening, at dusk, the magic suddenly loses its power and the dog becomes human again.’
13. ‘Nothing weighs so heavy as a secret: the ladies cannot carry it very far, and I even know a good many men who in this respect are women.’
14. ‘Great spirits with grave and heavy eyes.’
15. ‘It is safer in all cases to consult an expert. When you have tormented yourself endlessly, he knows immediately where you are in error, and you may even hope for his approval, for he knows when you have hit the mark.’
16. ‘O my fatherland, I see the walls and arches and columns and statues and lonely towers of our ancestors; but their glory I cannot see … Blessed be you who offered your breasts to the enemy’s lances for love of her who gave you birth … Hurrah! Hurrah! May you be blessed for as long as stories are told or written on this earth.’
17. ‘Many different lamentations came to pierce me like arrows whose shafts were barbed with pity.’
18. ‘The same firmness of will which enables one to resist love also serves to make it violent and long-lasting; weak people who are forever at the mercy of their passions are seldom truly passionate.’
19. ‘Yours is the rear wheel, on the second axle.’
20. ‘Remember what your theologians teach: the more a thing is perfect, the more it feels happiness, and thus also pain.’
21. ‘Luck is a fickle girl who doesn’t like lingering in any one place; she strokes your hair back from your brow, kisses you quickly and flits away. Lady Misfortune, by contrast, presses you tightly to her loving heart; says she’s not in a hurry, sits down beside your bed and knits.’
22. ‘Despite his hostility to art, Moses was none the less himself a great artist and possessed the true spirit of an artist. But this artistic spirit, in him as in his Egyptian fellow-countrymen, was directed towards the colossal and the indestructible. Yet he did not, like the Egyptians, create works of art out of brick and granite; rather, he built human pyramids, he chiseled human obelisks, he took a poor tribe of shepherds and created from it a people that would equally defy the centuries … he created Israel.’
23. ‘This mountain is so formed that it is always wearisome when one begins the ascent, but becomes easier the higher one climbs.’

Daniel Deronda

by Barbara Hardy

Daniel Deronda is the last of George Eliot's novels, and while it is always naturally tempting to make the most of the final achievement in a great career, this really is a last novel which can be called a remarkable conclusion. Of course it has many connections with her earlier novels, and it explores and develops subjects and techniques which go right back to the beginnings of her writing, but it also marks some striking new departures, new not only for her but for the English novel.

Like all her novels, it is a love-story, it is a profound psychological study in human relationships and individual growth, it is a challenging moral argument, and it is an analysis of contemporary Victorian society. The new departures can be seen everywhere. This is a love-story of a very profound and original cast, dealing not only in problems of sexual relationship rarely touched in contemporary fiction, but also laying bare kinds of feeling and impulse which the common run of Victorian love-stories did not even recognize. It is a story about a woman who marries for power, not for love, but in doing so meets her match in a man of greater and more perverted power. It is also the story of a man who is in love with two women, though the necessary phrase, 'in love', begs too many questions to be an adequate description of Daniel Deronda's relations with Mirah Cohen and Gwendolen Harleth. Its moral fable shows a pattern familiar to readers of George Eliot or Dickens or even Jane Austen: a moral rescue, a story of potent influence and redemption carried out by one human being for another. But George Eliot moved away from the convenient coincidence which she and others had exploited, the coincidence of love and moral rescue, and showed a difficult and highly embarrassing clash of different kinds of need and dependence and attraction. In showing Daniel's double commitment, to Mirah and to Gwendolen, she was led into a subtle discrimination of the difficulties of moral rescue and of the variations of human love. It is a discrimination which marks an advance in honesty and complexity, an advance even on *Middlemarch*. In showing the difficulties of loving and helping, George Eliot is indeed doing what she described as conducting 'a set of experiments in life'. The novel is experimental in form because its materials are complicatedly and truthfully close to realities: the good, clever, handsome hero and the less good and less clever beautiful heroine do not find that the course of true love runs roughly only to be smoothed out in a happy-ever-after. Love is shown as difficult and painful, settling some things but disturbing others. And the novel breaks away not only from simplified human relationships but from the simplified happy ending. It experiments with the novelist's conventional use of time in order to handle its human materials. Its technical originality and its experiments in life go together, for, like all great works of art, it makes no separation of vision and technique.

Its vision goes beyond what I have been describing as a more complex and honest view of human relationships. Its concern is with societies as well as individuals, and the career of Daniel Deronda is one of considerable social and political interest, for he is a study of a Jew, and of a leader. George Eliot is attempting to include new aspects of life, both social and psychological, which she had only touched on in her earlier 'experiments in life'.

As an experimental novel, *Daniel Deronda* is a work of peculiar excitements and certain difficulties. It pushes beyond the achievement of its predecessors, and the very nature of its push makes it less easy and less entertaining than these predecessors. We have to look at it as a remarkable instance of T. S. Eliot's definition of artistic development as a series of 'wholly new attempts' and 'new kinds of failure'. *Daniel Deronda* is trying to do many things, and not always succeeding. It is one of those works of art whose greatness is inextricably bound up with imperfection. It touches the limits of Victorian fiction, and its imaginative courage (covering both art and vision) results in a certain strain and tension.

It suffered in its own day and perhaps in ours too by the inevitable comparison with its immediate predecessor, *Middlemarch*. *Middlemarch* is, in everyone's opinion, George Eliot's greatest novel. Its complex drama has extraordinary breadth and depth, and, in addition, it has the strong and immediate appeal of a novel about family life and local politics. It is a more balanced and concrete novel than *Daniel Deronda*, and an easier and more attractive book to read, clothing its ideas in lively flesh and blood and inviting us to move in a world where we can at once get our bearings. It is the great novel of the here and now, of the everyday, and

its world is the world of our own familiar experiences, ordered, explained, made vivid, comprehensible, and moving. *Daniel Deronda* begins by presenting the everyday world, but beyond the first stages lie more remote and less accessible ranges. The world it takes us into is exotic and often uncomfortable. And this discomfort takes several forms: it is a world of alien sensibility, and this sensibility remains in places a little abstract and disembodied. It is a novel which reveals (or betrays) the large effort of imagination which has gone to make it.

I realize that this last sentence sounds vague and grandiose, but I mean every word of it to be a precise description. *Daniel Deronda* is not a novel like *Middlemarch*, a novel which has consumed its creative fires, whose finished life shows very little trace of the struggles and researches that lie behind it. It is a novel which shows the effort in effects not totally achieved, ideas not perfectly embodied in character, language not having quite the intended impact. And it is an effort to move into bigger areas – of the mind, of the world, of the art of fiction. Its successes and its failures illuminate the meaning of 'imagination' as do the successes and failures of other great but uneven writers like Wordsworth or D. H. Lawrence.

However, I do not want to exaggerate the failures. As I have suggested, George Eliot is a very skilled and crafty worker, and she takes us into the unfamiliar and difficult territory by first leading us through a known and familiar landscape. The first sentence, the first page, the first chapter, and the first book are arresting and brilliantly attractive, and the novel draws us slowly into its depths and breadths before we know exactly what is happening. Because the author does not, in the opinion of most critics, remain in complete control of the material or of the reader, it is an advantage to know a little about the range and purpose of the novel at the outset. If it is helpful to know something about the aims of the novelist and the conditions in which it was written, it may also be helpful to see it in relation to our own time. The modern reader is in some ways better equipped than the Victorian reader, for reasons both sociological and aesthetic, to give the book the sympathy and comprehension which it demands. In spite of the fact that it is a Victorian four-decker, lavish, detailed, slow-moving, written in the formal and highly-finished prose of its day, and using certain conventions which have more or less disappeared from the novel of today, it has many features of form and of feeling which are very familiar indeed. Because it pushed ahead of most contemporary fiction it has much in common with the best novels of our century.

Some of its first readers criticized the novel on grounds that were at once aesthetic and sociological, objecting not only to the presence of 'the Jewish problem' but to the way in which that problem was presented, to a kind of writing which was much more conspicuously ideological and symbolic than anything George Eliot had done before. Nearly a century later, we are now perfectly familiar with the ideological novel in its extreme form in the work of Huxley or Orwell, a form of fiction which uses argument, caricature, and fantasy in the interests of satire or polemic, and which often makes no attempt at psychological realism. I am not suggesting that *Daniel Deronda* is a kind of Victorian version of *Island*: George Eliot may be writing a novel in which character is simplified in order that values should be clearly stated, but the simplification only works in some of her characters, just as her use of something approaching fantasy only shows in some parts of the action. Simplification and fantasy are embedded in a richly and in some ways realistically psychological novel. It is perhaps also useful to call to mind the writings of less schematic but still violently polemic novelists like D. H. Lawrence and James Baldwin, whose novels are very different from the fables of Orwell, much closer to the movement and complexity of life, and who constantly appear to sacrifice the repose and unity of art to their impassioned concern with life. Their passion for humanity shows itself in a more than literary love and hatred which disrupt old forms and old feelings. Like Huxley and Orwell, though in different ways, they are typically twentieth-century in their hortatory and didactic art, their naked involvement with anguish, horror, pity, and uncertainty. It may seem a far cry from George Eliot to Baldwin, but for all its grand style, *Daniel Deronda* has much in common with his underdistanced art. One can of course go too far in finding modern equivalents. I make these comparisons only in order to suggest that readers who are moved by the imbalance and injustice of Baldwin's plea for justice, who can at least see why Lawrence makes Sir Clifford Chatterley impotent, and who are capable of appreciating the difference between novels aspiring to fable and those attempting a realistic imitation of human action may find the difficulties of *Daniel Deronda* congenial and understandable.

At the beginning of 1874, three years after *Middlemarch*, we find the first hints of the new novel in George Henry Lewes's letters to John Blackwood, George Eliot's publisher. Lewes tells Blackwood about her 'simmering' – the word she used for early broodings over a novel – and urges him to write to her encouragingly, to give her confidence in the depression and despair that returned with each new composition. Blackwood was a model of intelligent tact and sympathy and he warmed to the hint, wrote to ask how the new work was taking form, and elicited wry and pessimistic response. But the simmering went on, the talk became more definite, and by September Lewes is saying that he believes the new book will be a 'glorious' one. By the end of the year the novel has its name, and a good part of the first volume has been written, and

has passed beyond the simmering process 'into the irrevocable'. From the correspondence with Blackwood, with Frederic Harrison (whom she consulted about points of law) and Leslie Stephen (whom she asked about Cambridge and academic life), we can see the slow building up of the novel, her depression, illness, and lack of confidence, plans and difficulties. We have a very significant impression of Blackwood's first reading and reactions. He read manuscript and proofs as they came in, and as the novel went to the printer's before George Eliot had finished it, his position was that of the serial reader, wondering (in the most enthralled but also the most practical way) what was going to happen next.

Blackwood and his family, all devout admirers, plunged into the story of Gwendolen Harleth, responding to the fascination and charm of the 'witch', exclaiming 'splendid', 'glorious', 'stupendous', and praising the novel for its life and for the art that rendered that life. After reading the first 256 pages, the verdict of the Blackwood family was that she was outdoing *Middlemarch*. But as they read on, there comes a change in the tone. Blackwood was involved in the destiny of Gwendolen, and hoped that she would ultimately be saved, but he also had his eye on the reading public, and we find him suggesting that it might be useful to let loose a little gossip about the novel since the title, *Daniel Deronda*, did not really suggest that it was to be a picture of English life. Lewes's business sense was at least equal to Blackwood's and he suggested that the advertisements should emphasize the subject of English life, life of 'our own day', and also say that it moved 'for the most part in a higher sphere of Society'. Then begin the doubts, mostly exchanged behind the author's back or emerging softly between the lines of Blackwood's letters. When Blackwood admires the early scenes of ordinary Jewish life in the Cohen family, Lewes admits that he has sometimes shared the author's doubts about the Jewish parts, and George Eliot herself writes anxiously about comparisons with *Middlemarch* and irritably about the 'incalculableness' of the public. She was ill and usually depressed about each book but the doubts about this one are clear and specific. Will the public respond to a novel which is partly about English life of high society and partly about the Jews?

It is worth noticing that when, in February 1876, the first of its eight books came out, the publisher had read no more than the first four. He first read Books Five and Six (which take us into the Jewish section) in February, and there is an interesting little gap in the correspondence, followed by Blackwood's explanation that he has not written sooner because he has been puzzling over the new phase, and feels that it would still be 'presumptuous' to speak of Mordecai until he has read more. The author replies instantly with the nervous sensitive hope that he will see the bearings of Mordecai later, and the comment that she thought he might feel doubtful about this new material. She explains what she is trying to do: to aim at strength and complexity of character, and a 'higher strain of ideas'. She says despondently that giving 'new elements' in sufficiently vivid forms is the most difficult thing in art. Her letter is followed by one from Lewes regretting that Mordecai has not impressed Blackwood more, and warning him that his reactions have had a dampening effect on George Eliot, confirming her gloomy feeling that the presentation of the Jewish ideal would call out only imperfect sympathy. Blackwood takes his cue and hastens to write placatingly (though just a shade evasively and generally, for one who usually went into great detail) that 'there is no doubt about the marvellous Mordecai and oh that Cohen family', but her journal notes that the Jewish element is likely to please no one. Blackwood later commented, as the novel came out in its eight monthly parts from February to September, that she was holding the public even in her transitions, and that the 'Anti-Jews grumbled but went on'.

She writes to Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, that she had always expected the Jewish element to create resistance and repulsion, 'but precisely because I felt that the usual attitude of Christians towards Jews is – I hardly know whether to say more impious or more stupid when viewed in the light of their professed principles, I therefore felt urged to treat Jews with such sympathy and understanding as my nature and knowledge could attain to' and she goes on to speak of anti-Semitism as merely one branch of the typical English superiority 'towards all oriental peoples … a spirit of arrogance and contemptuous dictatorialness' which she called a national disgrace. After she and Lewes returned from the long holiday they always took after the completion of each book, she writes that she has now become very aware of the hostility and repugnance felt towards the Jewish parts. Lewes later writes to Dowden, admirer and critic, that she has been very pained to find friends and devoted readers 'utterly dead' to all the Jewish part. I must stress again the mixture of social and aesthetic response in such deadness: many of her readers objected to being forced into a Jewish environment, but such comments as 'Who can believe in such a prig as Deronda', and 'Mordecai is a Shadow' are not necessarily anti-Semitic objections. But it is in fact a book where social and aesthetic response are inextricably mingled, where the form and the dramatic psychology of the novel show the clear pressure of her social feelings. Amongst the unequivocally social responses, however, may be included *The Tablet*'s lament that 'the author commits a literary error when she makes Deronda abandon on learning the fact of his Jewish birth all that a modern English education weaves of Christianity and the results of Christianity into an English gentleman's life'.

Reviewers objected to the ideal portrayal, sometimes on the grounds that it was false, sometimes on the

grounds that the characters were implausible or schematic. But one section of the reading public did appreciate the Jewish parts, and these were the Jewish readers. Their response was not only an appreciation of sympathy but also strong words of praise for George Eliot's learning, and she had some compensation for the hostility of English readers in the appreciation of Jewish critics. One learned Jew, David Kaufmann, who wrote a short book on the novel which was translated from German into English, went so far as to say that only the Jewish reader could appreciate the novel. This was scarcely the point and was scarcely a compliment, though its grain of truth is incontestable.

It must be remembered that the Jewish element was likely to cause hostility for many reasons, apart from snobbish resentment and prejudice. The psychology and style of the Jewish characters, notably Mirah, Daniel, and Mordecai is simplified and idealized. The language of Mordecai is inflated and visionary, and the style of Mirah in every way sentimental. Daniel is a very interesting result of imaginative effort straining and almost, but not quite, succeeding. These ideal creatures are representative of a Semitic world placed in ideal contrast to a very sharply satirized world of English genteel and Gentile society. There are imperfect Jews in *Daniel Deronda* – Lapidoth, Mirah's father, is one, and a splendid creation he is. But there are far more imperfect Gentiles. More to the point, the portrayal of Jewish society is almost entirely approving, whether of family life in the East End of London or of the aspirations of learned Jews for a Jewish community where separateness and communication could be maintained, whereas all the general social portraiture of English life is highly critical. The county society of a corner of Wessex, presented and represented entirely through its gentry – the houses where one would dine – is very satirically drawn. The scenes of high society are no mere renunciations of the fashionable 'silver fork' novels of Disraeli and Bulwer Lytton which she had criticized in her early writings but strong satires of superficial culture, insincerity, mercenariness, triviality, and marriage-trading. Even a complex and sympathetic character like Gwendolen's uncle, Mr Gascoigne, represents all these defects, as well as representing a viable and typical way of life in his desire to gild over unpleasant worldliness with a glow of feeling and virtue. The rich and influential Arrowpoints are brilliantly coupled in satire, she with her apparent cultivation and bourgeois greed, he with his good cigar and 'This will never do, Cath', which is so articulate. And central to both story and satiric intent is Grandcourt, created by imagery of sadistic oppression, shown with his dogs and his horses, made narrow-minded, superior, bored, and contemptuous. He has a sense of style instead of a sense of value, and would, the author observes quietly, have made an excellent governor of a colony. But the whole English social scene is satirized, from the violent criticism at the centre, to the gentle but damaging portraits of the Mallingers. Gwendolen, like Dorothea in *Middlemarch*, is seen as the product of a certain education, a certain breeding, a certain set of narrow and dangerous expectations about life, class, and money. Concepts of blood, breeding, and gambling are also nailed down in explicit symbols like the house of Grapnell, whose fall carries the Harleth fortune with it, and in many a biting and flashing piece of local dialogue. Mrs Arrowpoint's Godwinlike disharmony of theory and practice comes out excellently in the fun of her exchanges with Gwendolen and with her own daughter; and Mr Bult, the politician, is both funnily and offensively pinned down, like the butterfly he is, in one exchange with Klesmer, who represents real culture as against bourgeois shams and superiority, and European (and Semitic) imagination as against political dullness. All the Englishmen (and some of the Englishwomen) in this novel give themselves away by being patronizing, and this piece of dialogue, for instance, shows George Eliot's criticism at its most serious and also at its most comic:

> 'I had no idea that you were a political man.'
>
> Klesmer's only answer was to fold his arms, put out his nether lip, and stare at Mr Bult.
>
> 'You must have been used to public speaking. You speak uncommonly well, though I don't agree with you. From what you said about sentiment, I fancy you are a Panslavist.'
>
> 'No; my name is Elijah. I am the wandering Jew,' said Klesmer, flashing a smile at Miss Arrowpoint, and suddenly making a mysterious wind-like rush backwards and forwards on the piano. Mr Bult felt this buffoonery rather offensive and Polish, but – Miss Arrowpoint being there – did not like to move away.

Mr Bult is one of a whole hierarchy – artistic, not social – of critical portraits of the English. He shows up Grandcourt's total lack of energy in at least being political (Gwendolen is almost amused at the pointlessness of a suggestion that Grandcourt should stand for Parliament) and in being slightly more decorous and delicate (Grandcourt really does just move away in the middle of conversations he finds irritating or tedious). The English are in varying degrees the objects of satire, and the European, especially the Jew, is also, in varying degrees, the object of praise. There are some exceptions, on either side, but the bias is unmistakable. It is in favour of the Jews and of the Jewish community, however dispersed and fragmentary this may be. Readers of James Baldwin will see the point of my earlier comparison. When George Eliot shows a favourable image of English family life, for instance, in the rather over-cosy scenes at the Meyrick fireside, it is worth noticing that the Meyrick family is made half-French. This allows them some genuine culture. The English (including Gwendolen) bear a strong resemblance to Matthew Arnold's Philistines. Few Victorian readers were likely to be easily won by this anti-English bias into a sympathy with the Jewish winners of her satiric competition. In

her first stories, *Scenes of Clerical Life* and *Adam Bede*, she had canvassed for sympathy with dull, small, ordinary people, ungrammatical curates, broken-nailed carpenters, and unattractive Methodists, but without manipulating them blatantly and exaggeratedly as models to be contrasted with the reader's own class and type. She had sometimes idealized them but often simply asked that we feel compassion for dull people, for limited virtue and null imagination, all shown in convincing individual shape. In *Daniel Deronda* the handling of satire and sympathy is understandable but undiplomatically blatant. What George Eliot produced was neither a purely distanced work of art (not that many novels are) nor a coolly contrived piece of diplomatic persuasion.

Such reasons for contemporary hostility are unlikely to have any effect on the modern reader. Now that the ideological dust has settled, the central criticism of the novel is a literary one. Critics from Leslie Stephen to F. R. Leavis have continued what George Eliot resentfully called the 'cutting-up' of the novel, and their preference for one part of the story over the other, shared by many common readers, has been a preference for the characters who are felt to be truly realized as against those who remain simplified and conceptual. Mordecai and Daniel are in fact not intended to be narrowly typical of Jews: they are explicitly broad-minded and unorthodox in dogma, and fairly complex in psychological presentation. But the actual feeling shared by most readers is that they are wooden and static and unreal. It is, by the way, misleading to talk about the two 'halves' of the book, especially when discussing Mordecai: his character, for better or for worse, really depends on about three scenes of visionary or political speech: two with Daniel and one in a working-man's club at the *Hand and Banner*. Daniel is a different matter, and indeed fills more than one 'half' of the novel which is named after him. But his actions and reactions bridge the Gentile and Jewish worlds.

It is possible to list various qualities in Daniel's make-up which show that George Eliot was trying to make him complicated, moving, changing, aware of the problems of being a model and a 'hero'. His jealousy of Hans, his resentment at the wrong kind of admiration, his mixed feelings about lower-class Jews, his susceptibility to the feelings and causes of others and his personal excess of empathy and open-mindedness – all these are interesting and complex features of the character, and are, moreover, shown to some extent in the process of growing. Like Goethe's Wilhelm Meister, he serves an apprenticeship and searches for relationships and a vocation. And by far the most interesting and unaccountably neglected aspect of the character, to my mind, is the trap which his altruism sets for him by providing him with two beautiful women in need of his rescue and support: George Eliot may be accused of a certain lack of development here, especially in her muted mentions of Daniel's feelings for Gwendolen, which would almost certainly have to come out as more sexual in a modern novel, and push difficulties even further, but she does create and face the issue, and Daniel does suffer from Gwendolen's assumptions and needs and from his final need to free her from her last illusions. He is the kind of character one can indeed make sound very interesting by just giving an account of his qualities and problems, but who is nevertheless less interesting than he ought to be. There is, within the same novel, the challenging presence of Grandcourt, as monolithic and simple a character as we can find in the Victorian novel, but a horrifyingly real presence. It is not just a matter of quantity, of the sheer number of features possessed by a character, but more a matter of effectively varied viewpoints. We see Grandcourt from many points of view – from Gwendolen's, Lydia Glasher's, his lackey's, his children's, his dogs', Daniel Deronda's, and, very briefly, from his author's sparing analysis. We slowly accumulate our impressions, touring the incredible monolith which comes to strike us as solidly alive. Views of Grandcourt are impressed, wary, intimately horrified, ambitious, cowed, right, wrong, serious, frivolous, dismissive, contemptuous, and deeply critical. We see him on some occasions almost as a caricature, on others as a felt power. Daniel Deronda is a character we are told all about in one long breath of exposition. The novel never quite recovers from its method of introduction, and tends to continue a single presentation from an unvarying point of view.

A round character, I believe, is a character we can see round. Instead of seeing round Daniel Deronda, we see through him, and very rapidly. He is never opaque, always transparent. He and Mordecai and Mirah are always being wheeled into different positions, like Dr Coppelius's doll, but with little effect. It is not, I think, that we object to noble characters (though we do tire a little of all the very wise and sound sayings that Daniel produces from what is after all a somewhat limited and protected experience) but rather that we object to an absence of personality. The question of personality in literature is not an easy one, but I think it depends on an impression of vital responsiveness in characters who change according to the company they keep. Even Pecksniff varies from situation to situation, and is created through a multitude of viewpoints. Not so Daniel Deronda. When there is an apparent shift in the point of view from which we see him, as when we move from the idealized views held by Hans and his sisters to the inner feelings of Daniel, the difference is a very slight and predictable one. He is not really seen from any but the author's admiring point of view. When he is criticized it is only for very noble faults, like excessive sympathy and altruism. He is never, like Dorothea Brooke, subjected to irony or even mild satire, even though his actual psychological content and situation

might well lend themselves to wry commentary. Neither his tendency to rescue maidens nor the subsequent leaning on the part of the maidens to prolong the rescue produces a situation totally uninviting to humour or irony. It is significantly impossible to imagine Daniel being laughed at, being criticized ironically, or – alas – acting out of humour or irony himself. He is the kind of character his author cannot be deeply critical of, or ironical about, and this exemption is a sign of lifelessness. Take Dorothea Brooke, or Adam Bede – you may want to call them prigs, but so does the author. If you could smile at Daniel, and be ironical about him, it would be in defiance of the author.

How can we account for this? Why do we see through him and not round him? I suggest that George Eliot created an individual in a way we may understand by looking at our feelings for a whole class of people. Her sympathy and admiration worked out aesthetically in just the way our sympathy for classes works. We all know in ourselves and others the automatic sympathy for 'the poor' or 'the old' or 'little children' or Negroes, or Jews. Such sympathy is indeed necessary and appropriate for classes of people who are in need of it, who are unprotected, vulnerable, or persecuted. But it can, in life as well as literature, deflect our attention from individual members of the class and produce that automatic and insensitive response to individuals which is one of the things we mean by sentimentality. In literature, this class-response can produce brilliant satire, funny minor characters, and dead heroes. And the hero's deadness in this novel is shown up by the heroine's vitality. Gwendolen's tantalizing iridescence makes her alive and opaque in a vivid way which shows up the lack of individual personality in some of her fellow-characters. The dislike or coldness that may be felt for Mirah or Mordecai or Daniel is very understandable, even in a modern reader who may be, like nineteenth-century Jews, on the side of George Eliot's own bias. And George Eliot's feeling is very understandable too. She is attempting to correct prejudice, and prejudice is the response to classes rather than individuals. The contemporary Jewish reader was in the same position as the author, in naturally responding to the class rather than to the individual. In the same way some readers will warm to the categorized sympathies of James Baldwin, while others may shy away from aesthetic criticism through a fear of sounding prejudiced. George Eliot's feelings for her character, and her conception of his qualities, his actions, and his destiny are all determined by her view of him as a Jew, and by her need to represent that view in a highly polemical context. She put pure class-feeling into the major Jewish characters, simplifying and reducing them, and injecting them with pure approval, admiration, and compassion. The result is a lack of balance, perfectly understandable, and even praiseworthy, once we recognize that the artist has failed to keep his head in his artistic creations because he has lost his heart in a good cause. It is no use pretending that the feeling for the good cause has produced perfect art.

Up to now, my analysis has also been in danger of cutting the novel into two parts, because I have discussed only one aspect of the relationships between the 'English' and Jewish parts, and that an ideological one. We know that George Eliot, though accused by Henry James of giving a 'diagram' rather than a 'picture', was always aware of the need to embody or 'incarnate' her ideas in the life of individual characters and action. Though there are some failures in *Daniel Deronda*, there is an abundance of felt life. The ideas are, moreover, embodied in the feeling of life. It is not a novel in which we can skip the ideas and simply enjoy certain aspects of the story and the psychological analysis. The most important source of the novel's unity is not the contrast between two societies and sets of values that I have just been mentioning, but the social contrast as it impinges on the life of individual people. In *Middlemarch* there is a celebrated excursus by the author in which she laments that readers and writers so often expect novels to be only love-stories. In most of her novels she gives us a love-story, but a love-story with a difference.

The story of *Daniel Deronda* is not only his story, but also that of Gwendolen Harleth. George Eliot has made an original and ironical link between a man of destiny, concerned with political life, problems of leadership and social order and value, and a very ordinary girl, whose immaturity and egoism show themselves in her total isolation, both in experience and in imagination, from the world of great causes. In Chapter 11 George Eliot makes this comment about Gwendolen's relation to the great world:

> Could there be a slenderer, more insignificant thread in human history than this consciousness of a girl, busy with her small inferences of the way in which she could make her life pleasant? – in a time, too, when ideas were with fresh vigour making armies of themselves, and the universal kinship was declaring itself fiercely: when women on the other side of the world would not mourn for the husbands and sons who died bravely in a common cause, and men stinted of bread on our side of the world heard of that willing loss and were patient: a time when the soul of man was waking to pulses which had for centuries been beating in him unheard, until their full sum made a new life of terror or of joy.

The historical reference was of course then topical: in 1862–3 the Lancashire mill-workers suffered because the Northern blockade of Southern ports in the American Civil War made cotton exports impossible. Slavery, poverty, and freedom are words that mean nothing to Gwendolen in political terms; she lacks the imagination, the knowledge, and even the necessary environment, for she is presented as typically sheltered and ignorant, a woman brought up like most upper-middle-class women of her time. The slave-owner mentality and problems

of poverty and freedom are going to mean a great deal to her. Moreover, she is eventually to be brought into staggering contact with the real world of large events, when she finally turns to assume that Daniel Deronda will love and protect her only to find that he has roles and destinies in a world of which she knows nothing. The very qualities that equip him for leadership – understanding, altruism, empathy – make him influence, protect, change, and finally leave Gwendolen. From the very beginning of the novel George Eliot is creating a heroine whose character and development are bound up with Daniel's very different life.

It is a novel where we have to talk about character and structure at the same time. There are three especially brilliant features of the form of the novel: a use of retrospect and flashback, which presents us with a significantly formed beginning and middle; a subtle and original use of double plot; and a conclusion which is extraordinary in its force and in its realism. But we cannot talk about these things as mere formal devices. They result from a special conception of character and action.

To take the flashback first. We start *in medias res* with the mysterious impact of Daniel Deronda's first encounter with Gwendolen, but the strong attraction which they both feel is placed in a context of other commitments: Gwendolen has met and is running away from Grandcourt, Daniel has met and is moving towards Mirah. There is no question of an obviously romantic love-story. More important, we are able to move backwards in a double flashback, which covers the action before the book begins for Gwendolen and for Daniel. In its compressed drama and reflective analysis this retrospect brings out the marked differences between these two people and their environments. We see Gwendolen as 'the princess in exile'. She is wilful, ignorant, powerful but limited, rootless and frustrated. We see Daniel as an exile too, not knowing his parentage, also rootless, but moving always towards other people in a selflessness which is admired and also gently criticized for a certain passiveness and lack of definition. The things that the characters have in common – isolation, lack of real work, striking personal charm – serve only to bring out the strong contrast between them. She lives entirely for self, and cannot conceive other people living from their separate centres of consciousness. He lives at the extreme of altruism, and his centre of self exists chiefly as a mirror for other lives. Here it must be noticed that successful psychology consists not merely in content but also in expression: a compressed account of the two characters can make them both sound interesting and complex, but Daniel's character is chiefly put forward, in this flashback, in rather undramatic exposition, whereas the omniscient author's commentary on Gwendolen moves along with the lively play of immediate and particular scene and dialogue. The function of the flashback is plain: we begin with the encounter between the two, so that the beginning of the novel makes conspicuous and pointed what would have been lost or blurred in a story which was told in chronological order. George Eliot was experimenting in controlling the reader's response to people and ideas. It is an experiment in form which should be placed beside similar experiments in time and narrative in *Tristram Shandy, Wuthering Heights*, and *Ulysses*.

The beginning of the novel also advertises the existence and importance of the double plot. Form is essentially the expression of the artist's vision, and the dual action of *Daniel Deronda* has to be considered as a special and appropriate way of telling *this* story, not merely as typical of the multiple actions we find in so many nineteenth-century novels in England and in Russia, novels which Henry James called 'fluid puddings' or 'large loose baggy monsters'. There is usually a function of contrast in the novel with a double plot. In *Can You Forgive Her?* Trollope shows us a serious case of emotional vacillation in one plot, and a comic case of merry widow's flirtatious choices in another. Thackeray shows us Amelia's marriage, loves, maternity, and poverty in one half of *Vanity Fair* while we contrast it with the parallel adventures and sufferings of Becky Sharp in the other. Tolstoy in *Anna Karenina* shows us the contrasted destinies of Anna and Levin, and in *War and Peace* shows us the large events of the Napoleonic Wars set beside the individual destinies which are shaped by war and peace. In *Daniel Deronda* George Eliot is doing something which can be compared with Tolstoy's achievement in *War and Peace* and it is worth remembering that Tolstoy too has been criticized for showing history in a very theoretical and 'inartistic' fashion. Both *War and Peace* and *Daniel Deronda* show the difficulties of combining philosophical and general writing with the vividness and movement of psychological realism. Both perhaps suffer from juxtaposing a marvellously rendered drama of individuals with a dryer and more schematic generalization.

The double plot draws attention not merely to the intended contrast of two worlds but to the unintentional contrast between a successful and a less successful piece of characterization. But we have to recognize that in drawing the memorably vivid character of her heroine, George Eliot was free from the need to express and develop general ideas about leadership and vocation. The point about Gwendolen is that she is a typical *individual*, and she can be all picture, without the hard outlines of diagram. She is one of those great characters in fiction whose vitality comes off the page like a blast of life. Her author had a long experience of creating heroines who grew, suffered, loved, changed, were guilty and were redeemed, but none of them, not even Maggie Tulliver, has the dimension and vitality and growth of Gwendolen. The flickering features of what George Eliot calls Gwendolen's 'iridescence' are not merely moral (ruthless demands for gratification,

sense of power unrelated to reality, mercenariness, put beside imagination, love, compassion, sense of powerlessness) but extend also to the play of her personality. Personality is something easy to spot in a novel and easy to miss when it does not come off (as in Daniel Deronda himself) but, as I have already suggested, it is less easy to analyse. It is one of the great virtues of this novel that we see not only moral change and intellectual development in Gwendolen's painful education by suffering and disillusion, but also the light and shade of her personality. Her vacillation, her innocence, her consciously manipulated charm, her physical energy, and her exuberance are all strongly shown in wit and humour and exhilarated speech. We have the few striking incidents where her nervous susceptibility is shown too. A panel flies open showing the picture of a dead man's face, and she is terrified. Klesmer opens her vision to broad horizons where her boasted musical proficiency is as trivial as small-talk, and she feels awe, rebuke, embarrassment, and resentment. Less unusual is her violent retreat from the love-making of her cousin Rex for whom she feels affection but no attraction. There is also the significant little anecdote about the canary she strangled as a child, which makes its sinister contribution to her complicated character and personality. It makes its contribution to the plot, too, which involves a murder story in which the murder is nearly but not actually committed. The handling of Gwendolen's terrible marriage to Grandcourt shows the novel's advantage over the narrative poem. The novelist shows a change very like the subduing of Browning's 'last Duchess' but unfolded in slow and terrifying action. Gwendolen's wit, which was the bubbling of exuberance, confidence, and personal gaiety, dries away to nothing, except for the odd forced flash when she tries to keep up appearances. Her controlled and brilliant acting turns to a passive and fearful questioning of life. She is never shown in physical exertion but restricted in movement as on the yacht. Only her pride and style remain. The susceptibility to nervous dread grows, in her nightmares both of sleep and waking life.

As she changes she continues in ignorance of that great world in which Daniel is moving and discovering his race, his identity, and his vocation. For marriage isolates her and imprisons her far more than her unmarried girlhood did, and there is the added irony that she married for power and freedom. The novel tells the story of her marriage with a compelling handling of both action and psychology, and since it is one of those Victorian stories where climax and surprise do genuinely astonish, I refrain from telling too much. For this novel does tell a good story. Its action of mystery, discovery, and fears, of fate, death, and guilt, places it with a group of Victorian novels of the 1860s called 'sensation novels'. We usually associate Wilkie Collins rather than George Eliot with this genre, but it was one which had some influence on writers whose talents and sensibility might be thought to lie right outside it – writers such as Trollope, Charlotte Yonge, and George Eliot. *Felix Holt* is the purest example of George Eliot's contribution to the sensation novel, but there are many features of *Daniel Deronda* which make it 'sensational' too. What I want to draw attention to is not the tangled and intricate intrigue, the lost fathers and unknown mothers, the melodramatic confrontations, the mysterious past passions, the illegitimate children, and such skeletons in cupboards, but rather the actual psychology of sensation, the *frisson* missing from many Victorian examples as from many of their descendants, the modern thrillers. The tension, mystery, dread, and strangeness of *Daniel Deronda* are not just manipulated to terrify the reader, but are part of the psychological experiences of the characters. Gwendolen differs from all the earlier heroines, whom she resembles so much on moral development, in her nervous equipment. She is afraid of being alone, she is afraid of being loved, she is afraid of certain changes in the light, she is afraid of large open spaces, she has dreams and nightmares. These feelings are sometimes symbolic of her values. Her fear of breadth is contrasted with the large visions of Daniel and Mordecai, and acts as a metaphor for her narrowness and smallness of life and experience. But we feel it is as sensation first, and as symbol second. The fear of the picture of the dead face haunts her nightmares and eventually attaches itself in a horrifying way to the feelings of hatred and guilt aroused in her marriage. Nor is she the only character to have dreams and visions. Mordecai must also be seen, I believe, as a visionary figure given an appropriate mind and nervous system, and the study of his imagination should be looked at in connexion with Gwendolen's. There are many subtle contrasts and cross-connexions in this elaborate and finely formed novel.

The realistic psychology must be seen in relation to the structure of the novel. Gwendolen's sensations and hopes and ignorance are created in a context of something resembling dramatic irony, for as we follow her movement through a narrow world which to her is the whole world, we also follow the separate movement of Deronda in the world of new ideas and sympathies. For her, he is a character in her private drama, a support, a mentor, and, at the end, a pillar of strength. For the reader, she is visibly only a small part of his life, and the part he plays in her story is far removed from his relationship with Mirah, Mordecai, his mother, and the destiny of the Jewish people. We do more than wisely observe her errors and illusions. We also follow the conflicting tensions of her dependence on Daniel and his separate and incompatible plans and discoveries. It is with something approaching nervous anxiety and apprehension as well as with superior knowledge that we follow the pattern of her feelings and experience the final encounter between hero and heroine. It is one of the most moving and acutely rendered moments in the novel. The double plot has shown us two worlds. It has

also moved in a form of counterpoint and tension which is a brilliant example of significant form – form giving significance to the matter it forms.

The double plot is sharply brought to a single conclusion. Gwendolen's fear of space and vision is justified and completed in a traumatic climax, the nature of which the reader has foreseen, the detail of which is rendered in a terrifyingly concrete and unpredictable immediacy. The conclusion to the novel is also something unusual in Victorian fiction. One should not make hasty generalizations about the neat and highly-finished endings in which we are told 'everything that will happen to everyone in the novel'. *Middlemarch* is like this, but the endings of *Tancred, Villette* and *The Newcomes* are certainly not tidy and easy. Nevertheless, *Daniel Deronda*'s conclusion has a special toughness and fluidity. Gwendolen is not like Maggie Tulliver, whose problems are solved by death, or like the preceding heroines, Esther Lyon in *Felix Holt* or Dorothea in *Middlemarch*, whose problems are solved by marriage. She stands alone at the end of the novel, facing the question-mark of the future. The ending is not completely open. The reader feels assured that Gwendolen is 'saved' as John Blackwood had hoped when he first began her story. There are hints and possibilities which seem to point ahead, but they are indefinite. The ending is not what we call a 'slice of life' ending, for it does not resemble the arbitrary chopping short of a life in the middle of the story. On the contrary, there is discovery and vision. But Gwendolen is not only alone, propped up neither by death, nor marriage, but has to start on a new set of expectations. She has found that what seemed like a possible happy-ever-after was in fact a new and painful beginning in which many of the things she had learnt would be lost, re-tested and rediscovered. We are left with a new refusal to simplify the nature of moral development, as well as with a new kind of ending to a novel. It is an ending which leaves us with a true sense of life's difficulties and their full complexity and toughness.

As throughout, what we say about Gwendolen does not quite apply to Daniel. He is also left poised on the edge of a future which is deliberately left 'vague and grand' as Blackwood put it, and perhaps this vagueness is necessary and tactful, like the very similar vagueness at the end of T. S. Eliot's *Family Reunion*. Both Harry and Daniel are set free for a special destiny and then left conveniently in mid-career. George Eliot was concerned to show the qualities of political leadership – or what she saw as these qualities – but the nature of the political career itself she was scarcely competent to handle. Although there is some truth in the suggestion that the Jewish theme was simply a symbol of a larger humane interest, it seems evident that she was defining in Daniel the specific qualities of a Zionist leader, a new Messiah who was appreciative of the chosen people but felt the need for communication as well as for Jewish separateness. Her Daniel 'come to judgment' is taken to the brink, and wisely left there. Even in *Middlemarch* she had steered clear of showing Will Ladislaw in his actual political career, and in *Daniel Deronda* the Zionist materials would have taken her beyond the rendering of politics into the rendering of prophecy. She was held back by the real obscurity of the Jewish future, by her habitual avoidance of showing politics in action, and also by her guarded meliorist vision. *Daniel Deronda* is a novel which I have called experimental, and I can do no better here than to quote George Eliot's own use of the word. It brings out very clearly the restrained, truthful, and tentative imaginative exploration she is making in this novel, an exploration which pushes so far, but no further. George Eliot wrote this in a letter to Joseph Payne, on 25 January, 1876, a few days before the first part of *Daniel Deronda* was published, and it is a statement both ambitious and honestly limited, to which I hope readers will return after they have read the novel:

> But my writing is simply a set of experiments in life – an endeavour to see what our thought and emotion may be capable of – what stores of motive, actual or hinted as possible, give promise of a better after which we may strive – what gains from past revelations and discipline we must strive to keep hold of as something more sure than shifting theory.

He just wanted a decent book to read …

Not too much to ask, is it? It was in 1935 when Allen Lane, Managing Director of Bodley Head Publishers, stood on a platform at Exeter railway station looking for something good to read on his journey back to London. His choice was limited to popular magazines and poor-quality paperbacks – the same choice faced every day by the vast majority of readers, few of whom could afford hardbacks. Lane's disappointment and subsequent anger at the range of books generally available led him to found a company – and change the world.

We believed in the existence in this country of a vast reading public for intelligent books at a low price, and staked everything on it'
Sir Allen Lane, 1902–1970, founder of Penguin Books

The quality paperback had arrived – and not just in bookshops. Lane was adamant that his Penguins should appear in chain stores and tobacconists, and should cost no more than a packet of cigarettes.

Reading habits (and cigarette prices) have changed since 1935, but Penguin still believes in publishing the best books for everybody to enjoy.We still believe that good design costs no more than bad design, and we still believe that quality books published passionately and responsibly make the world a better place.

So wherever you see the little bird – whether it's on a piece of prize-winning literary fiction or a celebrity autobiography, political tour de force or historical masterpiece, a serial-killer thriller, reference book, world classic or a piece of pure escapism – you can bet that it represents the very best that the genre has to offer.

Whatever you like to read – trust Penguin.

www.penguin.co.uk

Join the conversation:

Twitter Facebook

PENGUIN BOOKS

Published by the Penguin Group
Penguin Books Ltd, 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England
Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, USA
Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4P 2Y3
(a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.)
Penguin Ireland, 25 St Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland
(a division of Penguin Books Ltd)
Penguin Group (Australia), 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell, Victoria 3124, Australia (a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty Ltd)
Penguin Books India Pvt Ltd, 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi – 110 017, India
Penguin Group (NZ), 67 Apollo Drive, Rosedale, Auckland 0632, New Zealand
(a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd)
Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd, Block D, Rosebank Office Park, 181 Jan Smuts Avenue, Parktown North, Gauteng 2193, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

www.penguin.com

First published 1876
Published in Penguin Classics edited by Terence Cave 1995
This edition published in the Penguin English Library 2012

Cover design: Coralie Bickford-Smith

Front cover illustration: T. Johnson

The essay was originally published as the Introduction to the Penguin English Library edition of *Daniel Deronda* in 1967 © Barbara Hardy

ISBN: 978-0-14-197435-4

* Dante’s words are best rendered by our own poet in the lines at the head of the chapter.

* Do none of thy children defend thee? Arms! bring me arms! alone I will fight, alone I will fall.

Daniel Deronda

George Eliot

Lectulandia

Gwendolen Harleth es la mayor de cinco hermanas, que la admiran. Es hermosa, egoísta y malcriada, y cree poseer grandes cualidades. Cortejada por los jóvenes de su localidad, su destino cambiará cuando se cruce con el de Daniel Deronda, un joven aristocrático que vive con su tío y que posee con una disposición natural a ayudar a los demás.

Sin embargo, el joven vive atormentado al ignorar su verdadero origen. Tras conocer a Daniel y escuchar sus consejos, Gwendolen siente deseos de corregirse, pero la aparición de una chica judía, salvada por Daniel poco antes de morir ahogada en el río, inicia un difícil triángulo amoroso, con el agravante de que el judaísmo era despreciado en la sociedad británica y trataba de recuperar su esplendor.

La caracterización psicológica de los personajes hace de esta novela una obra maestra de la literatura victoriana.

George Eliot

Daniel Deronda

ePub r1.0
Titivillus 19.03.2025

Título original: *Daniel Deronda*
George Eliot, 1876
Traducción: Jacinto Forment Costa
Cubierta: Hugh Goldwin Riviére. 1901. *El jardín del Edén*. Óleo sobre lienzo. 123 × 94 cm

Editor digital: Titivillus
ePub base r3.0 (ePub 3)

Índice de contenido

Libro I. La chica malcriada
Libro II. Corrientes que se encuentran
Libro III. Las chicas eligen
Libro IV. Gwendolen aprovecha su oportunidad
Libro V. Mardoqueo
Libro VI. Revelaciones
Libro VII. La madre y el hijo
Libro VIII. Fruto y semilla
Sobre la autora

LIBRO I

La chica malcriada

Capítulo 1

> Los hombres no pueden hacer nada sin imaginar un comienzo. Incluso la Ciencia, que todo lo mide, parte necesariamente de una unidad imaginaria, y debe fijar un punto del incesante viaje de las estrellas si pretende que su reloj astral tenga un cero. Siempre se ha entendido que su ancestro menos preciso, la Poesía, empezara por el medio; pero si se piensa, resulta que su procedimiento no es muy diferente; la Ciencia también retrocede y avanza, divide su unidad en billones, y con su dedo apuntando al cero se sitúa de hecho *in medias res*[1]. Ninguna retrospección nos llevará al verdadero principio; y nuestro prólogo, tanto si se sitúa en el cielo o en la tierra[2], no es más que una parte de nuestra historia.

¿ERA ELLA HERMOSA O NO? ¿Y CUÁL ERA EL SECRETO DE LA FORMA O DE LA expresión que otorgaba una cualidad dinámica a su mirada? ¿Era el espíritu bueno o el maligno el que dominaba esos destellos? Probablemente el maligno; además, ¿por qué producía más bien un efecto de desasosiego y no de encanto sereno? ¿Por qué el deseo de mirar de nuevo se experimentaba como una coacción y no como un anhelo en el que consentía todo el ser?

La que suscitaba tales preguntas en la mente de Daniel Deronda estaba ocupada apostando, no al aire libre bajo el cielo del sur, echando al aire monedas sobre una pared en ruinas y cubierta de harapos, sino en uno de esos magníficos refugios preparado en los años más ilustres para el mismo tipo de deleites a un gran coste de molduras doradas, colores oscuros y figuras desnudas rechonchas, combinado todo con gran robustez, formando un apropiado condensador para el aliento humano, algo que pertenece, en gran parte, a la clase más alta, y que no es fácilmente respirado en cualquier otra parte en la misma proporción, al menos por personas de clase inferior.

Eran cerca de las cuatro de la tarde de un día de septiembre, así que el ambiente estaba formado por una mezcla de bruma visible. Había una gran calma, interrumpida solamente por un leve matraqueo, un ligero tintineo, un pequeño rumor, y un canto ocasional en francés, como el que sería esperable que saliera de una máquina autómata ingeniosamente construida. Alrededor de dos largas mesas se apiñaban sendos grupos de seres humanos, todos salvo uno, con sus caras y su atención puestas sobre la mesa. La excepción era un niño pequeño melancólico, con sus rodillas y pantorrillas cubiertas simplemente con el recubrimiento natural de su epidermis, pero revestido el resto de su cuerpo con un traje de imitación. Solo él tenía la cara girada hacia

la puerta, y fijando en ella la mirada vacía de un muchacho vestido de forma llamativa, posando como los chicos disfrazados de los anuncios colocados en la plataforma de un espectáculo itinerante, permanecía justo detrás de una dama profundamente enfrascada en la mesa de la ruleta.

Junto a esta mesa se congregaban unas cincuenta o sesenta personas, muchas en las últimas filas, donde de vez en cuando venía gente nueva, meros espectadores, de los cuales solo uno, normalmente una mujer, ponía de vez en cuando una moneda de cinco francos a lo tonto, solo por ver en qué consistía realmente la pasión de apostar. Aquellos que estaban disfrutando de ese placer más en serio, absortos en el juego, ofrecían variedades muy distantes de género europeo: livonios y españoles, greco-italianos y alemanes mestizos, ingleses aristócratas e ingleses plebeyos. Ciertamente se hallaba aquí una llamativa constatación de la igualdad humana. Los blancos dedos enjoyados de una condesa inglesa rozaban muy de cerca la demacrada mano amarillenta con aspecto de cangrejo que estiraba su muñeca desnuda para apoderarse de un montón de monedas —una mano que encajaba con la cara plana y pálida, los ojos profundos, las cejas canosas, y el escaso pelo mal peinado, y que parecía la ligera metamorfosis de un buitre—. ¿Y en qué otra parte habría consentido cortésmente su señoría sentarse junto a esa figura femenina de labios secos, prematuramente vieja, marchitada tras una breve mocedad como flores artificiales, sosteniendo un bolso descosido de terciopelo, y en ocasiones llevándose a la boca el punzón con el que recogía su carta? También allí, muy cerca de la condesa, se hallaba un respetable hombre de negocios de Londres, rubio y de manos suaves, con la parte delantera y trasera de su pulcro cabello escrupulosamente dividida, sabedor de las circulares dirigidas a la nobleza y a la alta sociedad, cuya insigne protección le permitía pasar sus vacaciones a la moda, y hasta cierto punto en su eminente compañía. No tenía la pasión del jugador, que anula el apetito, sino unas sanas intenciones de aprovechar el tiempo libre, que entre los intervalos en que se saca partido de los negocios y se gasta dicha ganancia ostentosamente, no ve una mejor manera de ganar dinero que en el juego, y gastándolo aún más ostentosamente —sabiendo que la Providencia nunca se había manifestado en contra de su diversión—, y siendo lo suficientemente desapasionado para retirarse si el deleite de ganar mucho y ver perder a otros se transformaba en la amargura de perder mucho y ver ganar a otros. Pues el vicio del juego consistía en perder dinero. En su porte debía haber algo de comerciante, pero en sus gustos competía perfectamente con los dueños de los títulos más

antiguos. De pie cerca de su silla había un bello italiano, tranquilo, hierático, que se hizo un hueco para colocar la primera pila de napoleones[3] que le entregó de una bolsa nueva un ayudante con bigote rizado. La pila fue entregada en medio minuto a una señora mayor que llevaba peluca y unas gafas que pellizcaban fuertemente su nariz. Los labios de la señora dibujaron una ligera sonrisa; pero el hierático italiano permaneció impasible, y —probablemente seguro de un sistema infalible que debía asegurarle la suerte— preparó inmediatamente una nueva pila. Lo mismo hizo un hombre con pintas de galán demacrado o libertino desgastado, que miraba la vida a través de un monóculo, y levantaba temblorosamente la mano cuando pedía un cambio. Seguramente no era un sistema riguroso lo que inspiraba su fiero aunque vacilante impulso en el juego, sino más bien el creerse un mirlo blanco, o simplemente el pensamiento que el día ocho del mes le daba suerte.

Pero, aunque cada jugador difería marcadamente del resto, había cierta uniformidad en la negatividad de su expresión, que tenía el efecto de una máscara, como si todos ellos hubieran comido de una misma fuente que les empujara a comportarse de la misma manera monótona.

El primer pensamiento de Deronda cuando sus ojos se posaron sobre esta escena de ambiente viciado fue que las apuestas de los mancebos españoles eran más envidiables. Visto lo visto hasta podría justificarse la afirmación de Rousseau de que el arte y la ciencia habían hecho un flaco favor a la humanidad. Pero de repente, sintió que el momento se volvía dramático. Una joven señorita, la última persona sobre la que sus ojos viajaron, puesta en pie en una esquina no lejos de él, capturó su atención. Estaba inclinada hablando en inglés a una señora de mediana edad sentada en el juego a su lado; al instante siguiente volvió a su juego, mostrando por entero su elegante figura, cuyo rostro quizás podía mirarse sin admiración, pero no con indiferencia.

El debate interno que suscitó en Deronda reflejó en su mirada una creciente expresión de escrutinio, alejándose cada vez más del fulgor que la admiración forma en los sentimientos más indefinidos. En un primer momento, sus ojos siguieron los movimientos de su cuerpo, sus brazos y sus manos, mientras esta enigmática sílfide se inclinaba para depositar su apuesta con aire decidido; luego, los volvió hacia su rostro, que sin ser observado en esos momentos por nadie, estaba fijo en el juego. La sílfide era una ganadora; y mientras sus diestros dedos, delicadamente enfundados en guantes de un color gris pálido, ordenaban las monedas que le habían sido entregadas para disponerlas de nuevo en el punto ganador, dio una mirada a su alrededor con

un aire tan extremadamente frío y neutral que no cabía en él la menor posibilidad de albergar lo que llamamos el arte de esconder un regocijo interior.

Pero durante ese momento de observación, sus ojos se encontraron con los de Deronda, y en lugar de apartarlos como ella habría deseado, era desagradablemente consciente de que quedaron atrapados… ¿por cuánto tiempo? La aguda sensación de que le estaba midiendo y observándola como a alguien inferior, de que él era de una naturaleza diferente a la de la escoria humana que la rodeaba, de que él mismo se sentía en otro mundo y por encima de ella, y de que la estaba examinando como a un espécimen de orden inferior, le produjo un molesto resentimiento que llenó ese instante de tensión. No hizo subir la sangre a sus mejillas, pero la apartó de sus labios. Se controló con la ayuda de un desdén interior, y sin más signo de emoción que la palidez de sus labios continuó su juego. Pero la mirada de Deronda parecía haber actuado como un mal de ojo. Perdió lo que puso. No importaba; había estado ganando desde que llegó a la ruleta con unos pocos napoleones en su poder, y tenía una reserva considerable. Cuando había empezado a creer en su suerte, otros lo habían hecho también. Se había imaginado que le seguía un cortejo que la adoraba como a una diosa de la suerte y observaba cómo su juego dirigía la fortuna. Los hombres que apuestan conocen tales cosas; ¿por qué no puede tener una supremacía semejante una mujer? Su amigo y acompañante, que al principio no había querido que ella jugase, ya comenzaba a consentir en ello, dando solo el consejo prudente de dejarlo en el momento adecuado y llevar dinero de vuelta a Inglaterra —consejo al que Gwendolen había respondido que a ella solo le importaba la excitación del juego, no las ganancias—. En ese supuesto, el presente momento debería haberle provocado un efecto de euforia en su ansiosa experiencia de apostar. Pero cuando su siguiente apuesta fue retirada, sintió el acaloramiento de las órbitas de sus ojos, y la certeza que tenía (sin mirarlo) de que aquel hombre todavía la observaba era como una presión que comenzaba a torturarla. Razón de más por la que no debía acobardarse, sino continuar jugando como si no le importara perder o ganar. Su amigo le tocó el codo y le propuso que abandonaran la mesa. Como respuesta, Gwendolen puso diez luises en el mismo lugar: se hallaba en ese estado de desafío en el que la mente pierde de vista cualquier objetivo más allá de la satisfacción de la resistencia rabiosa, y con la pueril estupidez de un impulso dominante incluye a la suerte entre sus objetos de desafío. Como no estaba ganando de forma llamativa, la siguiente

mejor opción era perder de forma llamativa. Controló sus músculos, y no mostró ningún temblor en la boca o en las manos. Cada vez que retiraban su apuesta, ella la doblaba. Muchos la miraban ahora, pero de la única observación que era consciente era de la de Deronda, que aunque ella nunca le dirigió la mirada, estaba segura de que no se había movido. Una situación así no dura demasiado tiempo: la catástrofe llega a menudo tan rápido por algo tan tonto como la mano del momento. «*Faites votre jeu, mesdames et messieurs*»[4], dijo la voz del destino saliendo entre el bigote y la perilla del crupier, y el brazo de Gwendolen se alargó para depositar su último montoncito de napoleones. «*Le jeu ne va plus*»[5], dijo el destino. Y en cinco segundos Gwendolen salió de la mesa, pero salió resueltamente, con su rostro fijo en Deronda y observándole. Hubo una sonrisa de ironía en los ojos de él cuando sus miradas se encontraron; pero al menos era preferible que él hubiera mantenido fija su atención en ella que no que la hubiera considerado como a una más de un enjambre de insectos sin fisonomía propia. Además, a pesar de su altivez e ironía, era difícil de creer que él no admirara su espíritu así como su persona: él era joven, apuesto, distinguido en apariencia —no uno de esos filisteos ridículos y desaliñados que creían que era su deber observar con desprecio las tablas de juego con miradas de protesta mientras pasaban por su lado—. El convencimiento profundo de que somos dignos de ser admirados no se viene abajo solo por un hecho negativo aislado; es más, cuando alguien de la extensa familia de la Vanidad, encuentra que su actuación ha sido recibida fríamente, comienza a pensar que poco a poco irá ganándose al inexplicado disidente. En la forma usual de pensar de Gwendolen se daba por hecho que ella sabía lo que era admirable y que ella misma era admirada. Esta base de pensamiento había recibido un golpe desfavorable, y se bamboleó un poco, pero no iba a ser fácilmente abatida.

Por la noche, la misma sala era aún más sofocante, brillaba con gas y con los vestidos de muchas damas que arrastraban sus colas o estaban sentadas en los otomanes[6].

La Nereida vestida de verde marino con ornamentos plateados, con una pluma de un pálido verde marino sustentada en plata y cayendo hacia atrás sobre su sombrero verde y su pelo castaño, era Gwendolen Harleth. Estaba bajo la protección o más bien sujeta a la dama que había estado sentada a su lado en la mesa de la ruleta; y con ellas estaba un caballero alemán con bigote blanco y pelo corto, de cejas pobladas y aspecto rígido. Caminaban

tranquilamente o se paraban para charlar con conocidos; y Gwendolen era muy observada por los grupos que permanecían sentados.

—Una chica desconcertante, esa señorita Harleth, no como otras.

—Cierto. Aparece ahora como una serpiente, toda ella de verde y plata, y contorsionando el cuello más de lo normal.

—Oh, siempre tiene que hacer algo extraordinario. Es ese tipo de chicas, imagino. ¿La encuentra usted hermosa, señor Vandernoodt?

—Mucho. Un hombre podría arriesgarse a que le colgaran por su causa, me refiero a un tonto, claro.

—¿Le gustan entonces una *nez retroussé*[7] y largos ojos achinados?

—Cuando combinan con una figura así.

—¿La figura de la serpiente?

—Si así lo desea. La mujer fue tentada por una serpiente. ¿Por qué no el hombre?

—Ciertamente es muy elegante. Pero le falta una brizna de color en sus mejillas. Tiene el tipo de belleza de Lamia[8].

—Por el contrario, yo creo que su aspecto es uno de sus principales encantos. Es de una palidez cálida; parece enteramente sana. Y esa nariz delicada con su pequeña curva gradual hacia arriba es arrebatadora. Y aún su boca, nunca hubo una boca más hermosa, los labios retraídos tan finamente, ¿no es así, Mackworth?

—¿Usted cree? Yo no soporto ese tipo de boca. Parece tan autocomplaciente, como si fuera consciente de su propia belleza; las curvas son demasiado inflexibles. Me gusta una boca que tiemble más.

—Por mi parte, la considero detestable —dijo una vieja matrona respetable—. Es sorprendente qué chicas más desagradables están ahora en boga. ¿Quiénes son esos Langen? ¿Alguien los conoce?

—Son gente *comme il faut*[9]. He comido con ellos varias veces en *la Russie*[10]. La baronesa es inglesa. La señorita Harleth la llama prima. La chica misma está muy bien criada, y es muy lista.

—¡Dios mío! ¿Y el barón?

—Un excelente mueble de decoración.

—Su baronesa está siempre en la mesa de la ruleta —dijo Mackworth—. Imagino que es ella quien ha enseñado a la chica a apostar.

—¡Oh, la vieja juega de forma moderada! Va echando una pieza de diez francos por aquí y por allá. La chica es más precipitada. Pero solo es un desvarío.

—He oído que hoy ha perdido todas sus ganancias. ¿Son ricos? ¿Alguien lo sabe?

—¡Ah!, ¿quién sabe? ¿Quién sabe eso acerca de nadie? —dijo el señor Vandernoodt, alejándose para unirse con los Langen.

La observación de que Gwendolen giraba su cuello más de lo normal esta noche era cierta. Pero no era porque quisiera dar una imagen más completa de serpiente: era porque buscaba por casualidad ver a Deronda, para poder indagar algo sobre este desconocido, bajo cuya mirada observadora todavía se amedrentaba. Al fin, llegó su oportunidad.

—Señor Vandrenoodt, usted conoce a todo el mundo —dijo Gwendolen, sin demasiada ansiedad, sino más bien con cierta languidez que a veces producía su voz de soprano—. ¿Quién es ese de al lado de la puerta?

—Hay al menos media docena al lado de la puerta. ¿Se refiere a ese viejo Adonis del ala de Jorge IV?

—No, no; el joven de pelo oscuro de la derecha de expresión horrible.

—¿Horrible, dice? Yo creo que es un tipo inusualmente distinguido.

—¿Pero quién es?

—Hace poco que ha venido a nuestro hotel con el señor Hugo Mallinger.

—¿El señor Hugo Mallinger?

—Sí. ¿Le conoce?

—No —Gwendolen se sonrojó ligeramente—. Está hospedado cerca de nosotros, pero nunca viene a visitarnos. ¿Cómo dijo que se llamaba el caballero de al lado de la puerta?

—Deronda, señor Deronda.

—¡Qué nombre más encantador! ¿Es inglés?

—Sí. Se dice que está emparentado con el Baronet[11]. ¿Está usted interesado en él?

—Sí. Creo que no es como el resto de los jóvenes.

—¿Y no admira usted al resto de jóvenes?

—Ni por asomo. Siempre sé lo que van a decir. Pero no puedo adivinar qué es lo que diría este señor Deronda. ¿Qué *es* lo que dice?

—Nada en particular. Estuve sentado con sus acompañantes una buena hora anoche en la terraza, y no dijo nada, ni siquiera fumaba. Parecía aburrido.

—Otra razón por la que debería conocerle. Yo siempre estoy aburrida.

—Creo que él estaría encantado de que les presentara. ¿Voy a buscarle? ¿Lo permite usted, Baronesa?

—¿Por qué no? Al fin y al cabo está emparentado con el señor Hugo Mallinger. Es un nuevo *rôle*[12] que has adoptado, Gwendolen, esto de estar siempre aburrida —continuó la señora von Langen cuando el señor Vandernoodt se hubo alejado—. Hasta ahora siempre habías mostrado interés por algo desde la mañana hasta la noche.

—Eso es porque estoy enormemente aburrida. Si voy a dejar el juego, tengo que romperme un brazo o la clavícula. Tengo que hacer que suceda algo; a menos que usted vuelva a Suiza y me lleve al Cervino[13].

—Tal vez el conocimiento de este señor Deronda hará las veces del Cervino.

—Tal vez.

Pero Gwendolen no conoció al señor Deronda en esta ocasión. El señor Vandernoodt no consiguió acercarlo esa noche, y cuando ella volvió a su habitación encontró una carta que la reclamaba de vuelta a casa.

Capítulo 2

> Este hombre está urdiendo un secreto entre nosotros dos, que pueda apaciguarme con sus ojos encontradizos como el que apacigua a una leona acorralada.

ESTA ES LA CARTA QUE GWENDOLEN ENCONTRÓ SOBRE SU MESA:

> Querida niña: esperaba oír noticias tuyas desde hace una semana. En tu última carta decías que los Langen pensaban ir a Baden. ¿Cómo podías ser tan insensata y no indicarme tu dirección? Estoy muy preocupada por que esta carta ni siquiera te llegue. En cualquier caso, ibas a regresar a casa a finales de septiembre, y ahora debo implorarte que regreses tan pronto como puedas, pues si gastaras todo el dinero estaría fuera de mi alcance enviarte más, y no debes pedirles prestado a los Langen, ya que no podría devolvérselo. Esta es la triste verdad, hija mía —ojalá pudiera prepararte mejor— pero ha caído sobre nosotros una terrible calamidad. Tú no sabes nada de negocios y no lo entenderás; pero Grapnell y Cia. han sucumbido y estamos en la ruina total, tanto tu tía Gascoigne como yo, solo que tu tío conserva su posición, así que prescindiendo del carruaje y consiguiendo alguna participación para los chicos, la familia puede ir tirando. Todos los bienes que nuestro pobre padre ahorró para nosotras se nos van en pagar las deudas. No hay nada que pueda decir que es mío propio. Es mejor que sepas esto cuanto antes, aunque me desgarra el corazón tener que contártelo. Por supuesto no podemos evitar pensar que fue una lástima que te fueras cuando lo hiciste. Pero no te critico por eso, mi querida niña; te ahorraría cualquier problema si pudiera. En tu camino a casa tendrás tiempo de hacerte a la idea del cambio que encontrarás. Quizás tengamos que dejar Offendene inmediatamente, ya que esperamos que el señor Haynes, que ya lo quería antes, nos lo quite ahora de las manos. Está claro que no podemos ir a la rectoría, no queda libre allí ni una esquina. Debemos conseguir alguna cabaña o algo así para cobijarnos, y deberemos vivir de la caridad de tu tío Gascoigne, hasta que vea qué más se puede hacer. No voy a ser capaz de pagar las deudas a los comerciantes además de las pagas de los criados. Coge fuerzas, mi querida niña, debemos resignarnos a la voluntad de Dios. Pero es duro resignarse al maldito atolondramiento del señor Lassman, que dicen fue la causa de la quiebra. Tus pobres hermanas solo pueden llorar conmigo y no pueden ayudarme. Una vez que estés aquí, veremos una rendija de esperanza. Siempre he sentido que era imposible que tú estuvieras destinada a la pobreza. Si los Langen desean permanecer en el extranjero, tal vez podrías ponerte bajo la protección de alguien más durante el viaje. Pero ven tan pronto como puedas con tu afligida y afectuosa mamá,
>
> FANNY DAVILOW.

La primera impresión que produjo esta carta en Gwendolen fue la de semiaturdimiento. La confianza implícita en que su destino debía ser el de una libertad lujosa, donde cualquier problema que ocurriera pudiera ser satisfactoriamente solucionado, había sido más fuertemente arraigada en su propia mente que en la de su mamá, al ser alimentada por su sangre joven y por ese sentido de superioridad que invadía gran parte de su consciencia. Era casi tan difícil para ella entender que de repente su posición era ahora de

pobreza y de dependencia humillante, como habría sido concebir en la enérgica corriente de su vida radiante el escalofriante pensamiento de que iba a morir. Permaneció sin moverse durante unos minutos, luego arrojó su sombrero y automáticamente se miró en el espejo. Los rizos de su suave pelo castaño todavía estaban en orden, lo suficientemente como para mostrarse en una sala de baile; y como en otras noches, Gwendolen podía haberse estado mirado prolongadamente por placer (sin duda, una indulgencia permisible); pero ahora no prestó atención a su belleza reflejada, y simplemente miraba fijamente enfrente de ella como si hubiera sido sacudida por un ruido odioso y estuviera esperando su causa. Al rato se echó sobre la esquina de un sofá de terciopelo rojo, cogió de nuevo la carta, la leyó con detenimiento dos veces, y la dejó caer finalmente al suelo, mientras posaba sus puños sobre su falda, sentándose perfectamente recta, sin derramar una sola lágrima. Su impulso fue el de considerar y resistir su situación antes que lamentarse. No hubo una sola exclamación interna del tipo «¡pobre mamá!». Su mamá no parecía haberle sacado nunca partido a la vida, y si Gwendolen hubiera estado en este momento dispuesta a sentir pena por alguien habría sido por ella —pues, ¿no era también ella misma, con todo derecho y naturalidad, el objeto de la ansiedad de su mamá?—. Pero era furia, era resistencia lo que la embarazaba; era una amarga contrariedad haber perdido sus ganancias en la ruleta, mientras que si su suerte hubiera continuado ese día podía haber reunido una gran suma de dinero que llevar a casa, o haber continuado jugando y ganar suficiente dinero para mantenerlos a todos. Incluso ahora, ¿no era posible? Solo le quedaban cuatro napoleones en su bolso, pero poseía varias alhajas que podía empeñar, una práctica tan común en la alta sociedad en los baños alemanes que no había por qué sentirse avergonzada; e incluso si no hubiera recibido la carta de su mamá, probablemente habría decidido sacar dinero de un collar etrusco que resulta que no había llevado desde su llegada; no, ella podía haberlo hecho con un sentimiento agradable de estar viviendo con intensidad y de escapar de la monotonía. Disponiendo de diez luises y si volvía su antigua suerte, que parecía probable, ¿qué podía hacer mejor que seguir jugando por unos días? Si en su casa desaprobaran la manera con la que consiguiera el dinero, como seguramente harían, con todo, habría dinero. La imaginación de Gwendolen dio vueltas sobre estos pensamientos con agradables consecuencias, pero no con la seguridad inquebrantable y la certeza creciente con que lo habría hecho si hubiera sido poseída por la manía del jugador. Habría ido a la mesa de la ruleta no por pasión, sino en busca de

ella: su mente todavía era capaz de discernir juiciosamente probabilidades equilibradas, y aunque la posibilidad de ganar la tentaba, la de perder la detenía con igual fuerza y le hizo imaginar cómo se hundiría su orgullo. Pues estaba resuelta a no contar a los Langen que una desgracia había caído sobre su familia, o a no acogerse de ninguna manera a su compasión; y si ella fuera a empeñar sus joyas de forma perceptible, harían preguntas y protestarían. La forma de evitar al máximo esas intolerables molestias era conseguir dinero de su collar por la mañana temprano, contar a los Langen que su mamá deseaba que volviera inmediatamente sin dar explicaciones, y tomar el tren hacia Bruselas esa noche. No llevaba ninguna sirvienta consigo, y los Langen podían poner dificultades en que regresara sola, pero su voluntad era definitiva.

En lugar de irse a dormir, encendió toda la luz que le fue posible y comenzó a empaquetar sus cosas, trabajando sin descanso, aunque en todo momento la visitaban las escenas que le sucederían al día siguiente —ya fueran, las aburridas explicaciones y despedidas, y el sinuoso viaje de vuelta hacia una casa cambiada, o bien la alternativa de quedarse un día más y volver de nuevo a la mesa de la ruleta—. Pero siempre en esta última escena aparecía la imagen de ese Deronda, observándola con exasperante ironía, y —las dos hirientes experiencias las revivía inevitablemente juntas—, mirándola fijamente abandonada de nuevo por la suerte. Esta imagen inoportuna ciertamente ayudó a decantar su resolución del lado de la salida inmediata, y a adelantar la recogida de sus cosas hasta el punto de que habría sido inconveniente un cambio de idea. Habían dado las doce al entrar en su habitación, y para cuando se estaba convenciendo de que dejaba solo lo necesario, la tenue luz del amanecer estaba entrando por la persiana blanca y quitando resplandor a sus velas. ¿Para qué irse a dormir? Un baño de agua fría la refrescó lo suficiente, y vio que una leve muestra de fatiga alrededor de sus ojos hacía su mirada aún más interesante. Antes de las seis estaba completamente lista, vestida de viaje, toda de gris, incluso con su sombrero de fieltro, pues pensaba confiar en salir tan pronto viera a otras damas saliendo de paseo. Y dado que estaba sentada de lado ante el largo espejo situado entre sus dos ventanas, se volvió para mirarse, apoyando el codo en el respaldo de la silla, en un ademán que podía haber sido escogido para su retrato. Es posible tener una fuerte ambición sin ninguna satisfacción de sí mismo, sino más bien descontento de sí mismo, que aún es más intenso cuando lo más profundo de la sensibilidad egoísta se convierte en un valor supremo; pero

Gwendolen no sabía nada de estas luchas internas. Tenía una inocente seguridad en su venturosa naturaleza, lo que cualquiera, a excepción del beato más estricto, habría perdonado en una chica que cada día había visto un agradable reflejo de esa naturaleza tanto en los cumplidos de sus amigos como en el espejo. Así que incluso al comienzo de estos problemas, al no tener nada más que hacer, se sentó observando su imagen ante la luz creciente, mientras su cara recobraba gradualmente su complacencia a la par con la alegría de la mañana. Sus bellos labios fueron curvándose hacia una sonrisa cada vez más decidida, y al fin se sacó el sombrero, se inclinó hacia delante, y besó el frío espejo que había parecido tan cálido. ¿Cómo podía creer en la aflicción? Si la atacara, sentía la fuerza para destruirla, desafiarla, o apartarse de ella, como ya había hecho. Nada parecía más posible que el ser capaz de seguir afrontando calamidades, grandes o pequeñas.

La señora von Lagen no salió en ningún momento antes del desayuno, así que Gwendolen pudo concluir a salvo su temprana caminata, tomando su camino por la calle Obere, donde se hallaba la tienda que necesitaba, y de la que estaba segura que abrían a las siete. A esa hora cualquier observador del que pudiera temer algo estaría, o bien en su camino hacia la región de los saltos de agua, o bien en su dormitorio; no obstante, sí había un gran hotel, el *Czarina*, del cual algunos ojos podían seguirla hasta la puerta del señor Wiener. Era un riesgo que había que correr: ¿no podía estar yendo a comprar algo de lo que se hubiera encaprichado? Esta implícita fantasía pasó por su mente mientras recordaba que el *Czarina* era el hotel de Deronda; pero ya estaba por entonces al final de la calle Obere, y continuó caminando con su acostumbrado movimiento de vaivén, cada línea de su cuerpo y su ropaje formando elegantes curvas, atractivas para cualquier ojo salvo aquellos que discernían en ellas un parecido excesivo al de la serpiente, y objetaban el renacimiento de la adoración a la misma. No miraba ni a la derecha ni a la izquierda, e hizo la transacción de su negocio en la tienda con una frialdad que no dejó remarcar nada al pequeño señor Wiener, salvo sus aires de gentil orgullo, y el tamaño y calidad superior de las tres turquesas centrales del collar que le ofrecía. Habían pertenecido una vez a la cadena de su padre; pero nunca había conocido a su padre y el collar era en todos los sentidos la alhaja de la que más podía prescindir. ¿Quién cree que es una contradicción imposible ser supersticioso y racional al mismo tiempo? La ruleta fomenta una superstición romántica en cuanto a las posibilidades del juego, y el más prosaico racionalismo en cuanto a los sentimientos humanos que implican

obtener el dinero necesario. Lo que más pesaba a Gwendolen era que, después de todo, solo tenía nueve luises que añadir a los cuatro de su bolso: ¡estos tratantes judíos eran tan mezquinos al sacar partido de los cristianos desafortunados en el juego! Pero ella era la huésped de los Langen en su apartamento alquilado, y no tenía que pagarles nada: trece luises harían algo más que llevarla a casa; incluso si decidiera arriesgar tres, los diez restantes serían más que suficientes, ya que quería viajar seguido, día y noche. Mientras volvía a casa, y aún cuando entró y se sentó en el salón para esperar a sus amigos y desayunar, todavía fluctuaba entre si salir inmediata o simplemente decir a los Langen que había recibido una carta de su mamá pidiéndole que volviera, y dejar aún sin decidir cuándo partiría. Era ya la hora normal del desayuno, y al oír a alguien entrar mientras estaba estirada hacia atrás, más bien cansada y furiosa, con los ojos cerrados, se levantó esperando ver a uno u otro de los Langen —con las palabras que debían determinar demorarse al menos un día más, ya formadas en sus labios—. Pero era el sirviente que traía un paquete para la señorita Harleth, que había sido dejado en ese momento en la puerta. Gwendolen lo cogió en sus manos e inmediatamente corrió hacia su habitación. Parecía más pálida y agitada que cuando había leído por primera vez la carta de su mamá. Algo —nunca supo qué— le reveló antes de abrir el paquete que contenía el collar del que se había desprendido. Por debajo del papel estaba envuelto en un pañuelo de lienzo, y dentro de él había una nota en papel arrancado, donde estaba escrito a lápiz con escritura clara pero rápida:

> Un desconocido que ha encontrado el collar de la señorita Harleth se lo devuelve con la esperanza de que no vuelva a correr el riesgo de perderlo.

Gwendolen enrojeció con el sofoco del orgullo herido. Una amplia esquina del pañuelo parecía haber sido torpemente arrancada para librarse de una marca; pero al instante pensó en la primera imagen del «desconocido» que le vino a la mente. Era Deronda; debía haberla visto ir a la tienda; debía haber ido inmediatamente después y redimido el collar. Se había tomado una libertad imperdonable, y se había atrevido a situarla a ella en una posición totalmente odiosa. ¿Qué podía hacer? Ciertamente, no actuar con la convicción de que era él quien le había enviado el collar y devolvérselo enseguida: eso implicaría hacer frente a la posibilidad de que podía no estar en lo cierto; no, incluso si el «desconocido» fuera él y no otro, sería demasiado duro para ella tanto el darle a entender que lo había adivinado

como el encontrarse de nuevo siendo ambos conscientes de ese reconocimiento. Él sabía muy bien que la estaba situando en una humillación impotente; era otra forma de sonreír ante ella irónicamente, y adoptar la actitud de un mentor altivo. Gwendolen sintió las amargas lágrimas de la mortificación salir y bajar por sus mejillas. Nunca nadie anteriormente se había atrevido a tratarla con ironía y desprecio. Una cosa estaba clara; debía llevar a cabo su resolución de abandonar el lugar inmediatamente; no podía reaparecer en el salón público, menos aún acercarse a la mesa de la ruleta y arriesgarse a ver a Deronda. Entonces hubo unos importunos golpeos a la puerta: el desayuno estaba listo. Con un movimiento apasionado, Gwendolen metió apresuradamente el collar, el lienzo y el trozo de papel en su neceser, se llevó el pañuelo a la cara, y tras relajarse durante uno o dos minutos, reunió su orgulloso autodominio y se reunió con sus amigos. Las señales que las lágrimas y la fatiga le habían dejado concordaban lo suficiente con el relato que ofreció de haber sido llamada a casa, por alguna razón que temía fuera un aprieto para su mamá, y de haber hecho ella misma las maletas, sin esperar la ayuda de la criada de su amiga. Hubo muchas protestas, como había esperado, de que fuera a viajar sola, pero se mantuvo firme en rechazar cualquier medida de compañía. Ella entraría en el compartimiento de señoras y seguiría así todo el viaje. Podría descansar perfectamente en el tren y no temía nada.

Resultó, de esta forma, que Gwendolen no volvió a dejarse ver en la mesa de la ruleta, sino que partió ese jueves por la noche hacia Bruselas, y llegó el sábado por la mañana a Offendene, el hogar donde ella y su familia iban pronto a dar su último adiós.

Capítulo 3

> No se nos escape ninguna flor primaveral. Coronémonos de capullos de rosas antes de que se marchiten.
>
> *Libro de la Sabiduría*[14]

ERA UNA LÁSTIMA QUE OFFENDENE NO FUERA LA CASA DE LA INFANCIA DE LA señorita Harleth, o que no estuviera encariñada con ella por recuerdos familiares. Una vida humana, pienso, debería estar bien arraigada en algún lugar de una tierra natal, donde pueda percibir el amor de la dulce familiaridad, bien por el aspecto de la tierra, por los hombres yendo al campo, por los sonidos y acentos que encierra, o por cualquier cosa que diera a ese primer hogar una inconfundible intimidad, diferente de cualquier percepción futura; un lugar donde la claridad de los primeros recuerdos pudieran ser recordados con afecto, y la familiaridad con todos los seres vivos de la zona, no solo los vecinos, sino incluso los perros y los burros, surgiera no por un esfuerzo sentimental o por reflexión, sino como un dulce hábito interior. A los cinco años, los mortales no están preparados para ser ciudadanos del mundo, para ser estimulados con nombres abstractos, para superar las preferencias con la imparcialidad; y ese ciego prejuicio a favor de la leche con la que empezamos a mamar, refleja la forma en que van a alimentarse el cuerpo y el alma al menos durante un tiempo. La mejor introducción a la astronomía es considerar los cielos nocturnos como una pequeña porción de estrellas que forman parte de la propia casa.

Pero esta bendita persistencia en la que puede arraigarse el afecto no había estado presente en la vida de Gwendolen. Su mamá había escogido Offendene como casa simplemente por su cercanía a la rectoría Pennicote, y hacía solo un año que la señora Davilow, Gwendolen, y sus cuatro hermanastras (la institutriz y la sirvienta les seguían en otro coche) eran conducidas por la avenida por primera vez en una tarde de últimos de octubre, en la que los grajos chillaban fuertemente sobre ellos y las hojas amarillas de los olmos formaban torbellinos.

La estación del año le sentaba bien al aspecto de la vieja casa rectangular de ladrillos, quizás demasiado ornamentada con piedras en cada hilera, incluso en la doble fila de ventanas estrechas y el grueso pórtico cuadrado. La

piedra atrapaba un liquen verdoso y los ladrillos un gris polvoriento, de forma que, aunque el edificio fuera rectangular, no había regularidad en su fisonomía, orientada hacia las tres avenidas que cortaban el este, el oeste y el sur en los cien metros de ancho de las viejas plantaciones que rodeaban los alrededores. Habría estado bien que la casa hubiera estado elevada en una loma, para poder mirar desde ella más allá de su pequeño propio dominio hacia los largos tejados de paja de los pueblos lejanos, las torres de las iglesias, las granjas esparcidas, el crecimiento gradual de bosques inesperados y las verdes extensiones de parques ondulados que conformaban la hermosa faz de la tierra en esa parte de Wessex. Pero aunque se situaba tras un muro en medio de prados lisos, por uno de sus lados se veían las cumbres de los escarpados acantilados del mundo exterior, que el paso de los días había ido formando regularmente.

La casa era justo lo suficientemente grande para considerarse una mansión, y estaba alquilada con una renta moderada, al no tener ningún feudo que dependiera de ella, y al ser difícil de alquilar debido a su mobiliario sombrío y su tapicería descolorida. Pero no había nada en el aspecto exterior o interior de la casa que hiciera sospechar a ningún observador que en ella vivían comerciantes retirados; esta certeza era un reclamo suficiente para los inquilinos que no solo tenían el gusto de distanciarse del mobiliario nuevo, sino que se movían además en esa situación en la que la anexión era un tema tabú; y tomar como hogar una casa que había servido a su vez a una condesa respetable añadió un ligero matiz a la satisfacción de la señora Davilow de disponer de un establecimiento propio. Esto, que extrañaba un poco a Gwendolen, fue de repente posible cuando murió su padrastro, el Capitán Davilow, que durante los últimos nueve años había estado con su familia en breves e irregulares ocasiones, el tiempo necesario para reconciliarse por sus prolongadas ausencias; pero a ella le importaba más el hecho que las explicaciones. De esta manera, mejoraron todas sus expectativas. A ella no le gustaba su antigua forma de vida, vagando continuamente de un balneario a un apartamento parisino, siempre sintiendo antipatía hacia nuevos muebles alquilados, y encontrándose con nueva gente en condiciones que la hacían aparecer como de poca importancia; y la excepción de haber pasado dos años en una escuela ostentosa —donde siempre que se le había presentado la ocasión de lucirse lo había conseguido—, había aumentado su convencimiento de que una persona tan excepcional como ella no podía permanecer en circunstancias ordinarias o en una posición social menos

ventajosa. Cualquier miedo al respecto desapareció ahora que su mamá iba a tener una casa propia; porque por lo que respecta a su nacimiento ella estaba tranquila. No sabía cómo su abuelo materno obtuvo la fortuna que luego heredaron sus dos hijas; pero aquel había sido un indio del oeste[15] —lo que parecía excluir cualquier cuestión al respecto—; y sabía que la familia de su padre era de clase tan alta como para no considerar en absoluto a la de su mamá, que sin embargo, conservaba con mucho orgullo un dibujo en miniatura de una tal señora Molly de esa familia. Habría sabido probablemente mucho más de su padre si no hubiera sido por un pequeño incidente ocurrido cuando ella tenía doce años. La señora Davilow había traído algunos recuerdos de su primer marido, cosa que hacía solo muy de vez en cuando, y mientras enseñaba el dibujo a Gwendolen, recordó con un fervor que parecía provenir de una peculiar compasión filial, el hecho que su padre había muerto cuando su pequeña hija iba en pañales. Gwendolen, pensando inmediatamente en el frío padrastro que había conocido la mayor parte de su vida mientras sus vestidos aún eran cortos, dijo:

—¿Por qué te casaste otra vez, mamá? Habría sido mejor que no lo hubieras hecho.

La señora Davilow enrojeció profundamente, un ligero movimiento convulsivo pasó por su cara, y cerrando de golpe los recuerdos dijo, con una violencia inusitada en ella:

—¡Niña, no tienes sentimientos!

Gwendolen, que tenía mucho cariño a su mamá, se sintió herida y avergonzada, y desde entonces nunca se atrevió a preguntar sobre su padre.

Esta no fue la única vez en que sintió la punzada de los remordimientos filiales. Siempre que era posible, se arreglaban las cosas de forma que tuviera una pequeña cama en la habitación de su mamá; esto era así porque la ternura maternal de la señora Davilow recaía principalmente en su hija mayor, nacida en sus tiempos más felices. Una noche, tras un ataque de dolor, la madre vio que la medicina que normalmente tenía al lado de su cama no había sido puesta, y pidió a Gwendolen que saliera de la cama y fuera a por ella. La joven y sana señorita, cómoda y caliente como un niño rosado en su cuna, protestó de salir al frío, y permaneciendo quieta, masculló una negativa. La señora Davilow pasó la noche sin su medicina y no se lo reprochó a su hija; pero al día siguiente, Gwendolen era claramente consciente de lo que debía pasar por la mente de su mamá, y trató de enmendar la situación con caricias, que no le costaron poco esfuerzo. Al haber sido siempre la mimada y el

orgullo de la familia, servida por la madre, las hermanas, la institutriz y las sirvientas, como si hubiera sido una princesa en el exilio, era normal que le costara trabajo pensar que su propio placer fuera menos importante que el de los demás, y cuando era contrariada del todo sentía un pasmoso resentimiento, capaz, en sus días más salvajes, de ensañarse en uno de esos apasionados actos que parecen contradecir las inclinaciones habituales. Aunque nunca había sido una chica que actuara sin pensar y de forma cruel, sino que de hecho estaba incluso encantada de rescatar a insectos a punto de ahogarse y observar cómo se recuperaban, tenía un desagradable y callado recuerdo de haber ahogado al canario de su hermana en un arrebato de cólera debido a que su canto agudo había estado continuamente sobreponiéndose disonantemente sobre el suyo. Se tomó la molestia de comprar un ratón blanco para su hermana como compensación, y aunque interiormente se excusaba en base a una peculiar sensibilidad que era una marca de su superioridad general, el pensamiento de ese crimen infame la hacía siempre estremecer. La naturaleza de Gwendolen no era despiadada, pero no le gustaba tener que enmendarse, y ahora que tenía veintitantos años, parte de su fuerza instintiva se había convertido en un autocontrol por el que se resguardaba de la humillación penitencial. Mostraba una pasión y una voluntad más fuertes que nunca, pero también las controlaba más fríamente.

El primer día en que llegaron a Offendene, que ni siquiera la señora Davilow había visto antes —ya que fue el señor Gascoigne el que se ocupó de buscar la casa—, cuando todos bajaron del carruaje y se situaron bajo el porche en frente de la puerta abierta, de forma que tuvieran tanto una vista general del lugar como una ligera impresión del recibidor de piedra y de las escaleras de las que colgaban pinturas sombrías, aunque alegradas por el fuego brillante de la chimenea, nadie dijo una palabra: su mamá, las cuatro hermanas y la institutriz, todas miraron a Gwendolen, como si sus sentimientos dependieran totalmente de su decisión. De las niñas, desde Alice, de dieciséis años, hasta Isabel, de diez, apenas podía decirse algo a simple vista, salvo que eran todavía niñas, y que sus vestidos negros estaban descosiéndose. La señorita Merry era ya de edad y de expresión indiferente. La ya marchita belleza de la señora Davilow parecía aún mover más a compasión por la desesperada mirada de socorro que lanzó a Gwendolen, la cual observaba la casa, el paisaje, y el recibidor con cara de hacer una valoración rápida. Daba la idea de un joven caballo de carreras encerrado en una caballeriza entre potros sin cuidar y mansos jamelgos.

—Bueno, querida, ¿qué piensas del sitio? —dijo al fin la señora Davilow, en un amable tono de desaprobación.

—Creo que es encantador —se apresuró a decir Gwendolen—. Un lugar romántico; en él podría pasar algo fascinante; un buen antecedente para cualquier cosa. Nadie tiene por qué sentirse avergonzado de vivir aquí.

—Ciertamente, no se ve nada ordinario.

—Oh, sería suficiente para cualquier tipo de personas de clase alta venida a menos. Podríamos haber estado viviendo aquí ostentosamente, y haber acabado en esto. ¡Habría sido tan romántico! Pero creía que nuestro tío Gascoigne y nuestra tía estarían aquí para recibirnos, y mi prima Ana —añadió Gwendolen con un tono de viva sorpresa.

—Hemos llegado pronto —dijo la señora Davilow; y entrando en el recibidor, dijo al ama de llaves que se acercaba—: ¿Espera que vengan el señor y la señora Gascoigne?

—Sí, señora: estuvieron aquí ayer para dar órdenes concretas sobre las lámparas y la comida. En cuanto a las lámparas, las tenía preparadas en todas las habitaciones desde la semana pasada, y todo está bien aireado. Me habría gustado que parte del mobiliario hubiera agradecido mejor la limpieza que se le ha hecho, pero *creo* que ustedes verán que a los metales se les ha hecho justicia. *Creo* que cuando vengan el señor y la señora Gascoigne, les dirán que nada ha sido desatendido. Estarán aquí a las cinco, seguro.

Esto satisfizo a Gwendolen, que no estaba preparada para que les recibieran con indiferencia; y tras subir unos pasos por la tosca escalera para cerciorarse de lo que había arriba, bajó de nuevo, y seguida por todas las niñas, dirigió una mirada a cada una de las habitaciones desde el recibidor —el comedor de madera oscura y un gastado damasco liso de color rojo, con una copia de un Snyders[16] de unos perros gruñones y recelosos sobre el aparador, y un Cristo partiendo el pan sobre la repisa de la chimenea; la biblioteca con aspecto y olor a cuero pardo viejo; y, finalmente, el escritorio, al que se accedía a través de una pequeña antesala, repleta de venerables bagatelas—.

—¡Mamá, mamá, ven aquí, por favor! —dijo Gwendolen mientras la señora Davilow hablaba con el ama de llaves—. Aquí hay un órgano. Seré Santa Cecilia[17]; alguien me pintará como Santa Cecilia. Jocosa (así llamaba a la señorita Merry), ven a soltarme el pelo. ¡Mira, mamá!

Se quitó el sombrero y los guantes, y se sentó ante el órgano en una postura admirable, mirando hacia arriba; mientras, la sumisa y triste Jocosa

quitó el único broche que le sujetaba el moño, y sacudió el cabello color castaño dejándolo caer en suave cascada por debajo de la esbelta cintura de su dueña.

La señora Davilow sonrió y, consciente de cómo su niña mimada se exhibía incluso en presencia del ama de llaves, dijo:

—¡Un cuadro encantador, querida! —Gwendolen se levantó y rio satisfecha. Todo ello parecía muy a propósito al entrar en una casa nueva que ofrecía unos antecedentes magníficos.

—¡Qué habitación más peculiar, extravagante y pintoresca! —continuó, mirando a su alrededor—. Me gustan estas viejas sillas tapizadas, las guirnaldas sobre el entablado de la pared, y las pinturas que deben representar algo. Esa con las líneas, que solo son líneas y un fondo negro, creo que es española, mamá.

—¡Oh, *Gwendolen*! —dijo la pequeña Isabel, con un tono de sorpresa, mientras sujetaba una punta abierta en los paneles del entablado al otro lado de la habitación.

Todas, Gwendolen la primera, fueron a mirar. El panel abierto había dejado al descubierto la imagen del rostro de un cadáver, vuelto del revés, del que parecía emerger un cuerpo oscuro con los brazos extendidos.

—¡Qué horror! —dijo la señora Davilow, con una mirada de aversión; pero Gwendolen se estremeció en silencio, e Isabel, una chiquilla tonta e impertinente con una memoria terrible, dijo:

—Nunca te quedarás sola en esta habitación, Gwendolen.

—¿Cómo te atreves a abrir cosas que deben estar encerradas, criaturilla perversa? —dijo Gwendolen, muy enfadada. Entonces, arrebatando el panel de las manos de la culpable, lo cerró precipitadamente, diciendo—: Hay una cerradura, ¿dónde está la llave? Encontrad la llave, o si no mandad hacer una, y que nadie más vuelva a abrirla; o mejor, entregadme a mí la llave.

Tras dirigir a todas esta orden Gwendolen se volvió, con la cara enrojecida por el escalofriante sobresalto, y dijo:

—Subamos a nuestra habitación, mamá.

El ama de llaves encontró la llave en el cajón de un armario cercano al panel y se la entregó a Bugle, la sirvienta de la señora, indicándole expresamente que se la diera a su Alteza Real.

—No sé a quién se refiere, señora Startin —dijo Bugle, que había estado ocupada en la planta de arriba durante la escena del escritorio, y algo ofendida por esta ironía en una nueva sirvienta.

—Me refiero a la joven señorita que será la que nos dé todas las órdenes, por lo que se deduce de su mirada y de su aspecto —replicó la señora Startin como para conciliarse—. Ella sabrá qué llave es.

—Si ya has preparado lo que queríamos ve a ver a las otras, Bugle —dijo Gwendolen cuando ella y la señora Davilow entraron en su habitación negra y amarilla, donde estaba preparado un pequeño y precioso canapé al lado de una camilla negra y amarilla conocida como «la mejor cama»—. Yo ayudaré a mamá.

Pero su primera acción fue ir directa al gran espejo que había entre las ventanas, que la reflejaba a ella y a toda la habitación, mientras que su mamá se sentó y dirigió su mirada también hacia el espejo.

—Este es un espejo que realza tu figura, Gwendolen; ¿o es el color negro y dorado el que te hace destacar de esta manera? —dijo la señora Davilow, mientras Gwendolen posaba de lado con tres cuartas partes de su cara mirando al espejo, y con la mano izquierda agitando su cabello.

—Sería una Santa Cecilia aceptable con algunas rosas blancas en la cabeza —dijo Gwendolen—, solo que, ¿y mi nariz, mamá? Creo que las narices de los santos no son respingonas. Ojalá me hubieras dado tu perfecta nariz recta; habría funcionado para cualquier tipo de personaje, una nariz apta para cualquier trabajo. La mía es solo una nariz feliz; no funcionaría para una tragedia.

—Oh, querida, cualquier nariz vale para ser desgraciada en este mundo —dijo la señora Davilow, dando un profundo y lánguido suspiro, lanzando su sombrero negro sobre la mesa, y descansando el codo en ella.

—¡Por favor, mamá! —protestó Gwendolen enérgicamente, apartándose del espejo algo disgustada—, no empieces a ser aburrida aquí. No me dejas disfrutar, y ahora puede ser todo tan feliz. ¿Qué te hace ser tan tétrica *en estos momentos*?

—Nada, querida —dijo la señora Davilow, que pareció animarse, y empezó a desvestirse—. Siempre es suficiente para mí verte a ti feliz.

—Pero deberías ser feliz tú —dijo Gwendolen, todavía disgustada, aunque ayudando a su mamá cariñosamente—. ¿Es que nadie puede ser feliz después de su juventud? A veces me has hecho sentir como si nada fuera de provecho. Con unas niñas tan difíciles, y Jocosa tan espantosamente fea e impávida, y todo lo que nos rodea tan improvisado, y tú que pareces tan hastiada, ¿para qué voy a ser algo? Pero ahora *podrías* ser feliz.

—Lo seré, querida —dijo la señora Davilow, acariciando la mejilla que se inclinaba hacia la suya.

—Sí, pero de verdad. No fingiéndolo —insistió Gwendolen resueltamente —. ¡Mira qué brazo y qué mano! Mucho más bonitos que los míos. Cualquiera puede ver que tú eras en conjunto mucho más hermosa.

—No, no, querida. Siempre fui más torpe. Ni la mitad de encantadora que tú.

—Bien, ¿pero de qué me sirve ser encantadora, si va me va a conducir al hastío sin que me importe nada? ¿Eso es lo que el matrimonio siempre trae consigo?

—No, hija, por supuesto que no. El matrimonio es el único estado feliz para una mujer, como confío que comprenderás.

—No lo soportaré si no es un estado feliz. Estoy decidida a ser feliz, por lo menos a no seguir enredando mi vida como otras personas hacen, no siendo ni haciendo nada remarcable. He decidido no dejar que otras personas interfieran en mi vida como han hecho. Aquí tienes un poco de agua caliente para ti, mamá —Gwendolen terminó y se quitó su propio vestido, esperando entonces a que su madre le enrollara el cabello.

Hubo uno o dos minutos de silencio, hasta que la señora Davilow dijo, mientras peinaba el cabello de su hija:

—Estoy segura de que nunca te he disgustado, Gwendolen.

—A menudo quieres que haga lo que no quiero hacer.

—¿Te refieres a darle las lecciones a Alice?

—Sí. Y lo he hecho porque me lo pediste. Pero, de todos modos, no veo por qué debo hacerlo. Me aburre enormemente, ¡es tan lenta! No tiene oído para la música, o el lenguaje, o cualquier otra cosa. Sería mucho mejor para ella que fuera ignorante, mamá: es su *papel*, lo haría muy bien.

—Es duro que digas eso de tu pobre hermana, Gwendolen, que es tan buena contigo, y te sirve como una esclava.

—No veo por qué es duro llamar a las cosas por su nombre y ponerlas en su lugar. Lo duro es que yo malgaste mi tiempo con ella. Y ahora, deja que te recoja el pelo, mamá.

—Debemos darnos prisa. Tus tíos estarán aquí pronto. Por el amor de Dios, no muestres tanto desdén hacia *ellos*, mi querida hija, o hacia tu prima Ana, con la que saldrás a pasear durante los próximos años. Prométemelo, Gwendolen. Ya sabes, no puedes pretender que Ana sea igual que tú.

—No quiero que sea igual —dijo Gwendolen, sacudiendo la cabeza y sonriendo, y la conversación terminó ahí.

Cuando llegaron el señor y la señora Gascoigne con su hija, Gwendolen, lejos de mostrar su desdén, se comportó tan amablemente como pudo. Se estaba presentando nuevamente ante unos parientes que no había visto desde que tenía dieciséis años, y estaba ansiosa —no, ansiosa no, pero sí decidida, a que la admiraran—.

La señora Gascoigne compartía cierta semejanza familiar con su hermana. Pero era más morena y menuda, su cara no tan desgastada por la pena, sus movimientos menos lánguidos, su expresión más alerta y crítica como correspondía a la mujer de un rector inclinada a ejercer una autoridad benéfica. Su parecido más cercano residía en su naturaleza sumisa, inclinada a la imitación y la obediencia; pero ello, debido a la diferencia de sus circunstancias, las había conducido a diferentes desenlaces. La hermana menor había sido imprudente, o al menos desafortunada en sus matrimonios; la mayor, se creía la más envidiada de las mujeres, y su acatamiento había terminado a veces tomando la forma de sorprendente determinación. Muchas de sus opiniones, como las que hacían referencia al gobierno de la Iglesia y al arzobispo Laud[18], parecían demasiado decididas para haber llegado de otra forma que no fuera su receptividad de esposa. Y la autoridad de su marido ofrecía mucha confianza. Este tenía ciertas virtudes agradables, algunas ventajas llamativas, y los fracasos que se le imputaban se inclinaban más bien hacia el lado del éxito.

Una de sus ventajas era la de ser una persona agradable, y quizá lo fuera más a los cincuenta y siete años que lo que lo había sido el resto de su vida. No tenía ningún rasgo distintivo clerical, no se mantenía reservado ni tenía la expresión de benignidad ostentosa, ni se veía un hombre altivo o de apariencias: envuelto en su gabardina, no podía haber sido identificado más que como un caballero con bellas facciones oscuras, una nariz que en su inicio tenía la intención de llegar a ser aguileña pero que de repente se volvía recta, y cabello de plata. Muchos hombres no se libran de la actitud que marca la propia profesión, ni tras cambiarse de ropa, pues es algo que penetra hasta la piel y los gestos. Pero en su caso, adoptaba una total independencia respecto a ella, quizás debido a que había sido en otro tiempo el Capitán Gaskin, y tomó las órdenes muy poco tiempo antes de su compromiso con la señorita Armyn. Si alguien hubiera objetado que su preparación para la función clerical era inadecuada, sus amigos habrían respondido que no había

nadie que pudiera ocupar mejor su puesto, que predicara mejor, o que tuviera más autoridad en su parroquia. Tenía un don natural para la administración, y era tolerante tanto respecto a las opiniones como a las conductas, porque él mismo sentía que podía dominarlas y estaba liberado de las irritaciones propias de las debilidades conscientes. Sonreía amablemente ante la afición de alguien que no compartía, por ejemplo, la floricultura o la colección de antigüedades, las cuales estaban muy en boga entre sus compañeros clérigos de su diócesis; él prefería seguir la historia de una campaña, o adivinar a partir de su conocimiento de los motivos de Nesselrode[19] cuál habría sido su conducta si nuestro consejero hubiera tomado otras decisiones. La manera de pensar del señor Gascoigne, tras algunas fluctuaciones, se había vuelto más eclesiástica que teológica; no la del anglicano moderno, sino lo que él mismo habría denominado como la del inglés sensato, libre de presunciones: la de un hombre que mira la religión nacional a la luz del día, y que la ve en su relación con las demás cosas. Ningún clérigo magistrado tenía más peso en las sesiones, o más sentido común respecto a los asuntos mundanos. De hecho, el peor de los reproches que se le podía hacer era el de la secularidad: no podía probarse que abandonara a los menos afortunados, pero tampoco podía negarse que las amistades que cultivaba tendían a ser las que fueran útiles para un padre de seis hijos y dos hijas; y los observadores más acerbos —pues, digamos que hará unos diez años, en Wesex, había personas cuya amargura nos parecería hoy en día increíble—, remarcaban que el tono de sus opiniones había cambiado según este principio de actuación. Pero la secularidad de carácter exitoso y alegre lleva consigo la falsa impresión de ser más egoísta que la del tipo fracasado y áspero, cuya historia secreta se resume con las terribles palabras: «Vendido, pero no pagado».

Gwendolen se preguntó cómo no recordaba mejor lo agradable que era su tío, pero a los dieciséis años su juicio no era el mismo, y lo veía todo con más indiferencia. Por el momento, era un asunto de extremo interés el que ella fuera a tener cerca el rostro de un digno pariente varón, y que la vida familiar dejara de ser exclusiva e insípidamente femenina. No pretendía que su tío la controlara, pero se dio cuenta al momento que le encantaría que él estuviera orgulloso de presentarla como su sobrina. Y era muy probable que él sintiera ese orgullo. Ciertamente, la miró con admiración mientras dijo:

—Has crecido más que Anna, querida —y rodeó tiernamente con el brazo a su hija, cuyo tímido rostro era una viva copia del suyo, haciéndole dar un

paso hacia delante—. Es un año más joven que tú, pero está claro que ya no va a crecer más. Espero que seáis excelentes compañeras.

Dirigió una mirada de comparación a su hija, pero si vio su inferioridad también vio que el aspecto tímido de Anna y su pequeña estatura iba a atraer a otros gustos distintos que los que fueran atraídos por Gwendolen, y que las chicas no iban a ser rivales. Gwendolen, por lo menos, fue consciente de ello, y besó a su prima con sincera cordialidad y gentileza, diciendo:

—Precisamente una compañera es lo que quiero. Estoy tan contenta de que hayamos venido a vivir aquí. Y mamá será más feliz ahora que está cerca de ti, tía.

La tía confió en que ciertamente así sería, y pensó que era una bendición que quedara vacía una casa adecuada en el distrito parroquial de su tío. Entonces, por supuesto, había que prestar atención a las otras cuatro chicas, a las que Gwendolen siempre había considerado demasiado superficiales: una mediocridad infantil formada por cuatro unidades sin importancia alguna, y que, sin embargo, desde su más temprana infancia se habían entrometido en su vida. Era consciente de haber sido mucho más amable con ellas de lo que se esperaba. Y era evidente para ella que también sus tíos lamentaban que hubiera tantas niñas —¡qué otra persona racional podría sentir otra cosa, salvo su pobre mamá, que no se daba cuenta de cómo Alice enderezaba los hombros y enarcaba las cejas hasta quedarse sin frente, cómo Bertha y Fanny cuchicheaban y contenían las risas, o cómo Isabel estaba siempre escuchando y mirando, y olvidando dónde estaba, e irritando continuamente a sus pobres hermanas mayores!—.

—Tú tienes hermanos varones, Anna —dijo Gwendolen, mientras sus tíos prestaban atención a sus hermanas—. Creo que en eso eres envidiable.

—Sí —dijo Anna, simplemente—, les tengo mucho cariño. Pero por descontado a papá le preocupa mucho su educación. Solía decir que hicieron que me comportara como un chico. Siempre estaba alborotando con Rex. Creo que te gustará Rex. Vendrá antes de Navidad.

—Recuerdo que pensaba de ti que eras más bien salvaje y nerviosa. Pero es difícil imaginarte ahora como alborotadora —dijo Gwendolen sonriendo.

—Claro que ahora he cambiado; ya soy mayor y todo eso. Pero en realidad todavía me gusta ir a recoger moras con Edwy y Lotta tanto como siempre. No me agrada mucho salir fuera, pero estoy segura que me gustará más ahora que estarás a menudo conmigo. No soy nada inteligente y nunca sé

que decir. Parece tan absurdo decir lo que todo el mundo ya sabe, y no puedo pensar en nada más que en lo que dice papá.

—Me encantará salir a pasear contigo —dijo Gwendolen, predispuesta hacia esta prima *inocente*—. ¿Te gusta montar a caballo?

—Sí, pero solo tenemos un *pony* de las islas de Shetland. Papá dice que no puede permitirse tener más, además de los caballos del carruaje y su propio corcel. Tiene tantos gastos.

—Pues yo pretendo tener un caballo y cabalgar mucho ahora —dijo Gwendolen, bien decidida—. ¿Son amables los vecinos en este barrio?

—Papá dice que sí, que mucho. Están los clérigos de la zona, ya sabes; y los Quallon y los Arrowpoint, y Lord Brackenshaw, y la residencia de Sir Hugo Mallinger, donde no hay nadie, lo cual está muy bien, porque hacemos meriendas campestres allí, y dos o tres familias en Wancester; ¡ah!, y la vieja señora Vulcany en Nutingwood, y…

Pero el anuncio de la comida liberó a Anna de seguir mostrando sus facultades descriptivas, y la pregunta de Gwendolen fue pronto indirectamente respondida por su tío, que hacía hincapié en las ventajas que él les había asegurado al conseguir un lugar como Offendene. Salvo la renta, no implicaba más gasto que lo que habría supuesto una casa ordinaria en Wancester.

—Y siempre vale la pena hacer un pequeño sacrificio por una casa de buen gusto —dijo el señor Gascoigne, en su tono sencillo, agradablemente seguro, lo que hacía que el mundo en general pareciera un lugar de residencia muy dócil—. Sobre todo si la que la lidera es una señora. La mejor gente os llamará a las puertas; y no necesitáis dar comidas costosas. Por supuesto, yo tengo que gastar una buena cantidad en ese sentido. Pero no tengo que pagar por mi casa. Si tuviera que pagar trescientos al año por la casa no podría invitar a nadie. Mis chicos son un gasto demasiado grande para mí. Estáis en mejores circunstancias vosotras, en proporción; no tenéis ningún gran gasto ahora, salvo la casa y el carruaje.

—Te aseguro, Fanny, que ahora que los chicos están creciendo, estoy obligada a dejar de gastar y planificarme —dijo la señora Gascoigne—. No soy buena administradora por naturaleza, pero Henry me ha enseñado. Es maravilloso para sacar el mejor partido de cada situación; no se concede ningún extra, y consigue sus ayudantes sin que le cuesten nada. Es difícil asumir que no le hayan prebendado[20], como otros han conseguido, si consideramos los amigos que ha hecho, y las necesidades que hay para los

hombres de opiniones moderadas en todos los aspectos. Si la Iglesia va a mantener su posición, debería contar con la capacidad y el carácter.

—¡Oh! Mi querida Nancy, olvidas la vieja historia: gracias al cielo, hay trescientos tan buenos como yo. Y en última instancia, no tenemos ninguna razón por la que quejarnos, estoy bien seguro. No podríamos tener un amigo más diligente que Lord Brackenshaw, tu arrendador, ya sabes, Fanny. La señora Brackenshaw te llamará. Y ya he hablado para que Gwendolen sea un miembro de nuestro club de arqueros, el club de arqueros de Brackenshaw, lo más selecto que existe. Eso, claro está, si ella no tiene objeción —añadió el señor Gascoigne, mirando a Gwendolen con ironía simpática.

—Es lo que más me gustaría —dijo Gwendolen—. No hay nada con lo que disfrute más que afinar la puntería… y acertar el blanco —terminó, con un hermoso movimiento de cabeza y una sonrisa.

—Nuestra Anna, pobre chica, no ve demasiado bien para el arco. Pero yo mismo me considero un disparador de primera clase, y tú practicarás conmigo. Tengo que hacerte un arco acabado antes de nuestro gran encuentro de julio. De hecho, respecto al vecindario, no podías estar mejor situada. Están los Arrowpoint, son de los mejores de nuestra gente. La señorita Arrowpoint es una muchacha encantadora: ha sido presentada en el campo de tiro. Tienen un magnífico lugar, Quetcham Hall, que vale la pena ver en lo que se refiere al arte; y a sus fiestas, a las que seguro vas a estar invitada; es de las cosas mejores que tenemos. El archidiácono frecuenta la casa, y siempre tienen una buena cantidad de personas en ella. La señora Arrowpoint es peculiar, sin duda; una especie de caricatura, de hecho, pero bienintencionada. Y la señorita Arrowpoint es extremadamente agradable. No todas las chicas jóvenes tienen madres tan bellas y graciosas como la tuya y la de Anna.

La señora Davilow sonrió débilmente ante este pequeño cumplido, pero el marido y su mujer se miraron afectuosamente el uno al otro, y Gwendolen pensó: «Mis tíos, al menos, son felices; no son tristes y lóbregos». En conjunto, se sentía satisfecha con sus perspectivas en Offendene; era mejor que cualquier situación anterior. Incluso los baratos ayudantes eclesiásticos, se enteró casualmente, eran casi siempre hombres jóvenes de buena familia, y del señor Middleton, el ayudante actual, se decía que era un lujo poder contar con él. Lástima que tuviese que marcharse pronto.

Pero había un asunto que estaba tan ansiosa de conseguir, que no podía dejar pasar la noche sin tomar medidas para asegurarlo. Sabía que su mamá

pretendía someterse completamente al juicio de su tío con respecto a los gastos; y la sumisión no era meramente prudencial, ya que la señora Davilow, consciente de que siempre se le había visto en desgracia, como la pobre querida Fanny, que tristemente se había equivocado en su segundo matrimonio, sintió una sincera satisfacción al ser identificada franca y cordialmente con la familia de su hermana, y en tener sus asuntos escrutados y manejados con una autoridad que presuponía un interés genuino. Por eso, la cuestión de una montura de caballo adecuada, que ya había sido discutida con su madre, había que referirla al señor Gascoigne; y después de que Gwendolen hubiera tocado el piano, que había sido traído de Wancester, hubiera cantado ante la admiración de sus oyentes e instigado a su tío a cantar un dueto con ella —¿qué otra influencia más suavizadora que esta para cualquier tío que se habría dedicado gustosamente al canto si no hubiera ocupado su tiempo en asuntos más graves?—, aprovechó el momento oportuno para decir:

—Mamá, no has hablado a mi tío de montar a caballo.

—Gwendolen desea por encima de todo tener un caballo para montar, un bello y ligero caballo para una dama —dijo la señora Davilow, mirando al señor Gascoigne—. ¿Crees que podemos permitírnoslo?

El señor Gascoigne hizo un movimiento con los labios y elevó sus bellas cejas sarcásticamente mirando a Gwendolen, que se había sentado con mucha gracia en el brazo del sillón de su mamá.

—Podríamos prestarle el *pony* de vez en cuando —dijo la señora Gascoigne, observando el rostro de su marido, presta a desaprobar la idea si él lo hacía.

—Eso sería importunar a otros, tía, y de todos modos, a mí no me gustaría. No soporto los ponis —dijo Gwendolen—. Preferiría estarme de otro capricho y tener un caballo. —(¿Hubo alguna vez alguna joven señorita o caballero que no estuviera dispuesto a estarse de un capricho sin especificar, a cambio del que sí especificaba?).

—Ella también monta. Tomó lecciones y el profesor dijo que tenía una forma de sentarse y de dirigir el caballo tan buenas que podría confiársele cualquier cabalgadura —dijo la señora Davilow, que aunque no hubiera deseado que su querida hija tuviera un caballo, no se habría atrevido a pelear por él a medias tintas.

—Está el precio del caballo, al menos sesenta con suerte, y luego mantenerlo —dijo el señor Gascoigne, en un tono que, si bien recatado,

traicionaba su disposición interna a aceptar la demanda—. Tenemos además los caballos del carruaje, un tema costoso. Y recordad lo que vosotras las señoras gastáis ahora en el aseo personal.

—Yo realmente no llevo más que dos vestidos negros —se apresuró a decir la señora Davilow—. Y las chicas más pequeñas, por descontado, no requieren un aseo especial por el momento. Además, Gwendolen me ahorra tanto al dar las lecciones de sus hermanas. —Aquí la mejilla delicada de la señora Davilow mostró un rápido enrojecimiento—. Si no fuera por eso, debería tener una institutriz mucho más cara, además de maestros.

Gwendolen sintió cierto enojo hacia su madre, pero lo disimuló con cuidado.

—¡Eso está bien, está realmente bien! —exclamó el señor Gascoigne, mirando a su mujer. Y Gwendolen, que, hay que reconocerlo, era una joven señorita de verdad, de repente se cambió al otro lado de la larga habitación, y se puso a tocar piezas de música facilitadas.

—La pobre chica no ha tenido caprichos ni deleites —dijo la señora Davilow, con un tono de súplica—. Me hago cargo que el gasto es más bien imprudente en este primer año de nuestro asentamiento. Pero ella necesita de verdad el ejercicio, necesita desfogarse. Y si la vierais a caballo, es algo espléndido.

—Es lo que no pudimos permitirnos para Anna —dijo la señora Gascoigne—. Pero ella, mi querida niña, solía montar el burro de Lotta y ya le estaba bien. (Anna estaba absorta en un juego con Isabel, la cual había rescatado un viejo tablero de *backgammon*, y había pedido quedarse una hora más).

—Ciertamente, una mujer delicada nunca aparece mejor que a caballo —dijo el señor Gascoigne—. Y Gwendolen tiene el cuerpo para ello. No digo que la cuestión no deba considerarse.

—Podríamos intentarlo durante un tiempo, en cualquier caso. Y si no, lo dejamos estar, si fuera necesario.

—Bueno, consultaré al mozo de caballos principal de Lord Brackenshaw. Él es mi *fidus Achates*[21] en lo que se refiere a caballos.

—Gracias —dijo la señora Davilow, aliviada—. Eres muy amable.

—Siempre lo es —dijo la señora Gascoigne. Y más tarde esa noche, cuando ella y su marido hablaban en privado, le dijo:

—Creo que has sido muy indulgente con el tema del caballo de Gwendolen. No debería reclamar más de lo que tu propia hija ni siquiera

piensa. Especialmente antes de que veamos cómo se las arregla Fanny con su renta. Y tú ya tienes bastante que hacer como para encargarte de todos estos problemas.

—Mi querida Nancy, hay que mirar las cosas desde todos los puntos de vista posible. La chica, sin duda, vale mucho; no se ven chicas como ella. Debería conseguir un matrimonio de primer nivel; y yo no estaría cumpliendo con mi deber si no me preocupara en ayudarla. Sabes que ha estado en una situación desventajosa con ese padrastro y una segunda familia, manteniéndose siempre en la sombra. Comprendo a la chica. Es una lástima que la familia de tu hermana no pueda gozar del provecho que habría obtenido si se hubiera casado con un individuo más bien de nuestra condición.

—¡De nuestra condición! También lo creo. No obstante, te agradezco que te hagas tanto cargo de los problemas de mi hermana y sus hijas. Estoy seguro que no podría envidiar nada de la pobre Fanny. Pero hay una cosa en la que he estado pensando, aunque tú nunca la has mencionado.

—¿De qué se trata?

—Los chicos. Espero que no se enamoren de Gwendolen.

—No presupongas nada en ese sentido, querida, y no habrá ningún peligro. Rex no estará en casa mucho tiempo seguido, y Warham se va a la India. Lo más sabio es dar por sentado que los primos no se enamoran. Si comienzas con precauciones, el asunto tendrá lugar a pesar de ellas. No hay que actuar en sustitución de la Providencia en estos casos, que se le escapan a uno de las manos igual que una brandada de pollos. Los chicos no tendrán nada, y Gwendolen no tendrá nada. No pueden casarse. En el caso peor no habrá más que un poco de llanto, y no puedes evitarles eso a los chicos y chicas.

La señora Gascoigne quedó satisfecha: si pasara algo, tenía la seguridad de sentir que su marido sabría qué hacer, y que tendría la energía para hacerlo.

Capítulo 4

> Gorgibus: Je te dis que le mariage est une chose Sainte et sacrée, et que c'est faire en honnêtes gens, que de débuter par là.
>
> Madelon: Mon Dieu! Que si tout le monde vous ressemblait, un roman serait bientôt fini! La belle chose que ce serait, si d'abord Cyrus épousait Mandane, et qu'Aornce de plain-pied fût marié à Clélie!… Laisezz-nous faire à loisir le tisú de notre roman, et n'en pressez pas tant la conclusión.
>
> MOLIÈRE, *Les Précieuses Ridicules*[22]

SERÍA JUZGAR DEMASIADO DURAMENTE AL RECTOR DE PENNICOTE POR CONSIDERAR, al mirar las cosas desde todos los puntos de vista, que Gwendolen era una chica que probablemente conseguiría un matrimonio brillante. ¿Por qué iba a diferir él de sus contemporáneos en este asunto, deseando a su sobrina un peor desenlace a su encantadora soltería de lo que ellos aprobarían como lo mejor posible? Hay que dejar claro para su crédito que sus sentimientos al respecto eran del todo bienintencionados. Y considerando la relación de los medios a los fines, habría sido una locura dejarse guiar por lo excepcional y lo idílico —recomendar que Gwendolen llevara un vestido tan descosido como el de Griselda[23] para que un marqués se enamorara de ella, o haber insistido en que, como se buscaba una buena doncella, debía apartarse del camino—. Los cálculos del señor Gascoigne eran del tipo racional, y ni siquiera pensaba en conseguir un caballo demasiado salvaje para que Gwendolen pudiera sufrir un accidente y ser rescatada por un hombre de bienes. Deseaba lo mejor para su sobrina, y quería de verdad verla entre la mejor sociedad del vecindario.

La intención de su tío coincidía plenamente con los deseos de Gwendolen. Pero que nadie piense que también ella se imaginaba que deslumbrar al mundo con su gracia a lomos de un caballo o con cualquier otra hazaña le facilitaría un matrimonio brillante. Estaba obligada a admitir que tarde o temprano tendría que casarse; pero estaba indiscutiblemente segura de que su matrimonio no sería de tipo mediocre, con el que se contentaban la mayoría de las chicas. Sin embargo, sus pensamientos acerca del cumplimiento de su ambición nunca iban dirigidos hacia el matrimonio; los dramas en los cuales se imaginaba la heroína no iban encaminados en ese sentido. Que los hombres la cortejaran o suspiraran desesperadamente por conseguirla era sin duda una

indispensable y agradable garantía de poder femenino; pero convertirse en esposa y llevar las cadenas domésticas de esa condición era, después de todo, una necesidad fastidiosa. Su observación del matrimonio la había decantado a considerarlo un estado más bien triste, en el que una mujer no podía hacer lo que le gustaba, tenía más niños de los deseables, era, por consiguiente, aburrida, y se sumergía irrevocablemente en la rutina. Por supuesto, el matrimonio era una promoción social; no podía esperar una vida soltera; pero las promociones tenían que ser tomadas en ocasiones con hierbas amargas —al hombre que quiere ser líder no le bastará un puesto de rango menor; y esta sílfide de miembros delicados y veinte años quería liderar—. Sucede que tales pasiones también moran en cuerpos femeninos. En Gwendolen, moraban en un cuerpo totalmente femenino, sin tener ninguna referencia que las sofocara o desequilibrara; de esta forma, se sentía capaz de mover el mundo sin contar siquiera con un punto de apoyo. Pretendía hacer lo que le placiera de forma llamativa; o más bien, todo lo que pudiera hacer para impresionar a los demás y llenarlos de admiración, y obtener reflejada así una sensación más ardiente de vivir; todo eso le parecía atractivo a su fantasía.

—Gwendolen no descansará hasta que no tenga el mundo a sus pies —dijo la señorita Merry, la institutriz sumisa: palabras exageradas que desde hace tiempo se usan en su sentido más moderado; ¿pues quién no ha oído hablar de una persona reservada de la que se diga que tiene el mundo a sus pies por solo media docena de comentarios elogiosos que circulan entre la alta sociedad? Y las palabras no eran tan vagas como para indicar la expectativa de una grandeza confusa que existía en lo más alto de la joven autosatisfacción de la pobre Gwendolen. A otras personas no les importaba hacerse esclavos, y dejar que su vida fuera manejada como barcos vacíos en los que no había ninguna voluntad: con ella no iba a suceder eso, ella no iba permitir sacrificarse por criaturas de menos valor que ella, sino que aprovecharía cada ocasión que la vida le ofreciera, y asaltaría la ocasión gracias a su inteligencia excepcional. Ciertamente, asentarse en Offendene, con los alicientes de la señora Brackenshaw, el club de arqueros, y las invitaciones a comer de los Arrowpoint, como los máximos exponentes de su entorno, no parecía una situación que le fuera a ofrecer oportunidades espléndidas; pero la confianza de Gwendolen residía básicamente en sí misma. Se sentía bien preparada para afrontar la vida. Consideraba que, hasta entonces, no había sido muy bien tratada por la fortuna, pero en lo que respectaba a su «educación», habría admitido que no la dejaba en desventaja.

Su aguda mente había aprehendido rápidamente en la escuela la estricta formalidad de reglas inexplicadas y hechos desconectados que salva a la ignorancia de cualquier signo doloroso de debilidad; y lo que retenía de esa época, ya lo había aprendido a través de novelas, obras de teatro y poemas. En cuanto al francés y a la música, lo único que se justifica que domine una joven señorita, no creía que tuviera motivos por qué preocuparse; y cuando a todas estas calificaciones, positivas y negativas, añadimos el sentido espontáneo de la capacidad con el que nacen ciertas personas agraciadas, que al considerar cualquier asunto, lo impregnan con su propia habilidad de juzgarlo correctamente, ¿a quién puede extrañar que Gwendolen se sintiera preparada para afrontar su propio destino?

Había muchos asuntos en el mundo —quizás la mayoría—, en los que no sentía ningún interés, porque eran estúpidos; pues los asuntos pueden aparecer estúpidos ante los jóvenes como la luz parece opaca a los mayores; pero no habría estado perdida si hubieran aparecido en cualquier conversación. Hay que recordar que nadie le había disputado su poder ni su superioridad habitual. Así como había sucedido a su llegada a Offendene, el primer pensamiento de los que la rodeaban siempre había sido: ¿qué piensa Gwendolen de esto? Si el lacayo pisaba fuertemente haciendo crujir sus botas, o si la colada no estaba bien hecha, la criada decía: «Esto no contentará a la señorita Harleth»; si la leña de la chimenea sacaba humo hacia la habitación, la señora Davilow, cuyos débiles ojos sufrían mucho con este inconveniente, pedía perdón a Gwendolen. Si cuando estaban bajo la tensión de un viaje, no aparecía a desayunar hasta que todas las demás hubieran acabado, el único problema era si la tostada y el café de Gwendolen estarían todavía crujientes y calientes respectivamente. Y cuando se presentaba con su pelo de color castaño recién lavado, cayendo hacia atrás y esperando a que la mano de su mamá lo recogiera, mientras sus grandes ojos oscuros relucían como los largos destellos de un ónice de mármol recién pulido, tenía que ser siempre ella quien tenía que ser tolerante, rogar a Alice, que se sentaba sobre ella, que no elevara los hombros de esa forma tan espantosa, y que Isabel, en lugar de abalanzarse sobre ella y acribillarla a preguntas fuera a ver a la señorita Merry.

Era siempre la princesa exiliada, que en tiempos de carestía tenía asegurado su bollo de desayuno hecho a base de la harina más fina, procedente de los granos más finos de trigo, y si tenían que marcharse, tenía que llevar consigo, fuera de su equipaje, su tenedor de plata. ¿Cómo podía

permitírsele todo esto? La respuesta podría estar en la superficie: por su belleza, por su inusitada manera de ser, por su férrea voluntad que se manifestaba en sus movimientos graciosos y en el tono de su voz, claro y contundente, de forma que si entraba en la sala de estar en un día lluvioso cuando todos los demás estaban decaídos y sin ganas de nada, parecía haber una razón suficiente y repentina para despabilarse de nuevo; incluso los camareros de los hoteles mostraban la mayor prontitud en retirar las migas y arrugas del mantel o en limpiar las manchas de vino a las que acudían las moscas. Este potente encanto, añadido al hecho de que era la hija mayor, a la que su mamá siempre trataba como disculpándose por la pena que le infligía tener un padrastro, parecía ser sin duda el verdadero motivo de la tiranía doméstica de Gwendolen, de forma que buscar alguna otra razón sería como preguntar por qué hay luz cuando brilla el sol. Pero cuidado con llegar a conclusiones precipitadas. Recuerdo haber visto dirigir el mismo tipo de atención asidua y de disculpa a personas que para nada eran hermosas o inusuales, cuya firmeza no se mostraba de ningún modo elegante o agradable, ni que fueran hijas mayores de una madre tierna, tímida y compungida por haberlos sometido a ciertos inconvenientes. Algunos de ellos eran hombres muy normales. Y el único punto en común entre todos ellos era una fuerte determinación por tener lo que deseaban, sin miedo alguno a volverse desagradables o peligrosos cuando no lo conseguían. ¿A quién tratan mejor y sirven con más miedo las mujeres débiles que al hombre sin escrúpulos —capaz, si no tiene vía libre en casa, de ir y hacer más daño fuera?—. Así es que dudo si incluso sin su potente encanto y su peculiar posición filial Gwendolen no habría seguido actuando como una reina exiliada, solo con mantener su innata energía de deseo egoísta y su poder de inspirar miedo sobre lo que va a decir o hacer. Sin embargo, tenía el encanto, y los que la temían también la adoraban, estando el miedo y la adoración quizás aumentados por lo que podría llamarse la iridiscencia de su carácter, el adoptar varias actitudes, o mejor dicho, el adoptar actitudes contrarias. Pues el discurso de Macbeth[24] acerca de la imposibilidad de ser muchas cosas contrarias al mismo tiempo se refería a los torpes movimientos de la acción y no a las más sutiles posibilidades del sentimiento. No podemos pronunciar una palabra leal y permanecer en un silencio traidor, no podemos matar y no matar al mismo tiempo; pero un instante es un espacio lo suficientemente amplio para dar cabida al deseo leal y traidor, al destello de un pensamiento asesino y su repentina transformación en arrepentimiento.

Capítulo 5

> Cotiza su propia discreción a precio tan alto, que, fuera de ella, nada tiene valor.
>
> *Mucho ruido y pocas nueces*[25]

La recepción de Gwendolen en el vecindario satisfizo las expectativas de su tío. Desde el castillo de Brackenshaw a los Firs en Wancester, donde el señor Quallon, el banquero, mantenía una casa magnífica, fue bienvenida con manifiesta admiración, e incluso a aquellas señoras a las que apenas cayó bien, les gustó tener una nueva chica interesante a la que invitar; pues las anfitrionas que se proponen entretener deben formar sus fiestas de igual forma que los ministros forman sus gabinetes de consejo: sobre motivos diferentes al de los gustos personales. Así que para tener a Gwendolen como invitada no era necesario preguntar a nadie quién estaba en desacuerdo, pues la señora Davilow daba siempre una imagen tranquila y pintoresca como acompañante, y el señor Gascoigne estaba en todas partes buscando su propio beneficio.

Entre las casas donde Gwendolen no era del todo bien vista, aunque sí invitada, estaba la de Quetcham Hall. Una de sus primeras invitaciones fue a una gran comida en ese lugar, lo que le sirvió como introducción general a la sociedad del vecindario, ya que estando seleccionadas treinta personas de todas las edades, pocas eran las familias que no contaban con ningún miembro en la fiesta. Ninguna figura juvenil allí era comparable a la de Gwendolen mientras atravesaba las largas salas adornadas con luces y flores. Al principio era solo visible como una esbelta figura que avanzaba flotando con su vestido blanco, y poco a poco fue ganando luminosidad y definición a medida que se aproximaba atravesando las anchas puertas. Nunca había hecho antes un paseo de esas características, y se sintió exultante de que encajara tanto con ella: cualquiera de los que la miraban por primera vez habrían supuesto que las largas galerías y los lacayos que la acompañaban habían sido una constante en su vida; mientras que su prima Anna, que realmente estaba más acostumbrada a estas cosas, se sentía casi tan incómoda como un conejo puesto de repente en ese lugar tan bien iluminado.

—¿Quién es esa que está con Gascoigne? —dijo el archidiácono, desatendiendo una conversación sobre maniobras militares en la que él, como

clérigo, estaba naturalmente implicado. Y su hijo, al otro lado de la sala, un joven estudiante prometedor, que ya había sugerido algunas enmiendas «no menos elegantes que ingeniosas» de textos griegos, dijo casi al mismo tiempo —: Por san Jorge, ¿quién es esa chica de cabeza tan destacada y aspecto tan jovial?

Excepto para una persona muy benevolente, que mirara bien a todo el mundo, era bastante exasperante ver cómo Gwendolen eclipsaba a los demás: cómo incluso la hermosa señorita Lawe, que estaba explicando que era la hija de la señora Lawe, se volvió súbitamente más sencilla, torpe e inanimada; y cómo la señorita Arrowpoint, que desgraciadamente también iba vestida de blanco, pareció inmediatamente recordar a una *carte-de-visite*, de la que solo destacaba tal vez la falda. Como a la señorita Arrowpoint se le admiraba normalmente por el modo discreto y amable con que llevaba sus fortunas, atenuando de esta forma las rarezas de su madre, parecía más bien inapropiado que Gwendolen pasara por una persona socialmente más importante que ella.

—En realidad no es tan hermosa, si llegas a examinar sus rasgos —dijo en confidencia, más tarde esa noche, la señora Arrowpoint a la señora Vulcany —. Es el estilo que tiene lo que produce un gran efecto al principio, pero después es menos agradable.

De hecho, Gwendolen, sin quererlo, sino pretendiendo lo contrario, había ofendido a su anfitriona, que aunque no fuera una mujer irritable o reivindicativa, tenía sus susceptibilidades. La señora de Quetcham reunía varias condiciones que, a los ojos de los observadores del vecindario, parecían tener una especial conexión entre ellos. De vez en cuando se recordaba que había sido la heredera de una fortuna ganada gracias a ciertos negocios en la ciudad, para justificar su figura regordeta, su áspera voz de loro, y un cabello recogido sistemáticamente hacia arriba; y dado que estos rasgos la hacían externamente ridícula, para muchos era natural que tuviera lo que se denomina tendencias literarias. Una pequeña comparación habría mostrado que todos estos puntos se encuentran repartidos de forma diferente; hijas de magistrados tienen a menudo buenas maneras y bellos rasgos, mujeres hermosas tienen a veces la voz áspera o ronca, y la producción de literatura pobre es compatible con cualquier tipo de físico, tanto masculino como femenino.

Gwendolen, que tenía un agudo sentido para detectar los desvaríos de los demás, pero que mostraba gran interés hacia cualquiera que pudiera hacerle la

vida más agradable, quiso ganarse a la señora Arrowpoint otorgándole un interés y una atención probablemente más allá de lo que los demás estuvieran dispuestos a ofrecer. Pero la confianza en uno mismo hace que al dirigirnos a los demás veamos en ellos una torpeza imaginaria, de la misma forma que los ricos hablan a los pobres en un tono engatusador, o aquellos que están en la flor de la vida elevan su voz y hablan artificiosamente a los mayores, concibiéndolos enseguida como sordos e incluso estúpidos. Gwendolen, a pesar de su inteligencia y su intención de ser agradable, no pudo escapar de esa forma de estupidez: dedujo, irreflexivamente, que porque la señora Arrowpoint fuera ridícula era probable que también le faltara perspicacia, y continuó con su juego sin sospechar que se notaban todos los matices de su compartimiento.

—He oído que es usted aficionada a los libros, así como a la música, a los caballos, y al arco —dijo la señora Arrowpoint, acercándose a ella para un *tête-à-tête*[26] en el escritorio después de comer—: Catherine estará muy contenta de tener una vecina tan simpática. —Estas breves palabras podían haber parecido de lo más cortés, si hubieran sido emitidas en un tono medio; pero al componerse de un horrible sonido vibrante, dieron a Gwendolen una sensación de que la tutelaban, a lo que respondió elegantemente:

—Soy yo quien soy afortunada. La señorita Arrowpoint me enseñará lo que es la buena música: yo seré por completo un aprendiz. He oído que tiene un talento musical excepcional.

—Catherine ha tenido sin duda todas las facilidades. Tenemos un músico de primera en la casa ahora: Herr Klesmer; quizás conozca todas sus composiciones. Permítame que se lo presente. Usted canta, creo. Catherine toca tres instrumentos, pero no canta. Espero que nos permita que le oigamos. Supongo que es usted una cantante consumada.

—¡Oh, no! «*die Kraft is schwach, allein die Lust ist gross*»[27], como dice Mefistófeles.

—Ah, estudia usted a Goethe. Las jóvenes señoritas de hoy van tan avanzadas. Supongo que lo ha leído usted todo.

—No, de verdad. Estaría encantada que me dijera qué leer. He estado mirando en todos los libros de la biblioteca de Offendene, pero no hay nada que valga la pena. Las páginas están pegadas entre ellas y tienen olor a moho. ¡Ojalá pudiera escribir libros para entretenerme, como usted hace! ¡Qué maravilla debe ser escribir libros del gusto de una en vez de leer los de otros! Los libros hechos en casa deben ser tan buenos.

Por un momento, la mirada de la señora Arrowpoint fue un poco más aguda, pero la peligrosa semejanza a una sátira en la última frase tomó el color de simplicidad infantil cuando Gwendolen añadió:

—¡Daría cualquier cosa por escribir un libro!

—¿Y por qué no podría? —la animó la señora Arrowpoint—. No tiene más que empezar como yo hice. Pluma, tinta y papel están al mando de todo el mundo. Pero con gusto le enviaré todo lo que he escrito.

—Gracias. Me encantará leer todos sus escritos. Estar familiarizada con los autores debe dar una comprensión especial de sus libros: una podría ser capaz entonces de discernir qué partes son divertidas y cuáles serias. Yo seguro que río siempre donde no toca. —Aquí la misma Gwendolen percibió el peligro, y añadió rápidamente—: En Shakespeare, ya sabe, y en otros grandes escritores que nunca podemos ver. Pero yo siempre quiero saber más de lo que hay en los libros.

—Si está interesada en cualquiera de mis temas puedo prestarle muchas páginas extra en manuscritos —dijo la señora Arrowpoint mientras Gwendolen se sentía, tristemente, como una joven señorita que tuviera que declarar que le encanta la pescadilla en conserva—. Son cosas que me atrevo a decir que acabaré publicando: varios amigos me han animado a hacerlo, y a una no le gusta ser obstinada. Mi *Tasso*[28], por ejemplo, podía haber hecho que ocupara el doble.

—Adoro a Tasso —dijo Gwendolen.

—Bueno, tendrá usted todos mis escritos, si quiere. Ha habido tantos, ya sabe, que han escrito sobre Tasso; pero están todos equivocados. En cuanto a la particular naturaleza de su locura, sus sentimientos hacia Leonora, la verdadera causa de su encarcelamiento, y el personaje de Leonora, que, en mi opinión, era una mujer sin sentimientos, ya que de otra forma se habría casado con él y no con su hermano, todos están equivocados. Difiero de todo el mundo.

—¡Qué interesante! —dijo Gwendolen—. Me gusta diferir de todo el mundo. Creo que es tan estúpido estar de acuerdo. Eso es lo peor de escribir tus propias opiniones: haces que todos estén de acuerdo contigo.

Este razonamiento reavivó una ligera sospecha en la señora Arrowpoint, y de nuevo su mirada se tornó por un momento examinadora. Pero Gwendolen parecía muy inocente, y continuó con un aire dócil.

—No conozco nada de Tasso salvo la *Gerusalemme Liberata*[29], que leímos y aprendimos de memoria en la escuela.

—Ah, su vida es más interesante que su poesía. He reconstruido la primera parte de su vida en una especie de novela. Cuando uno piensa en su padre Bernardo y en esas cosas, debe haber mucho de cierto.

—La imaginación es a menudo más verdadera que los hechos —dijo Gwendolen decididamente, aunque no podría haber explicado estas confusas palabras más que si fueran coptas o etruscas—. Estaré encantada de aprender todo sobre Tasso, y sobre su locura especialmente. Supongo que los poetas siempre están un poco locos.

—Así es: «La mirada del ardiente poeta en su hermoso delirio»[30]; y alguien dijo de Marlowe:

> Pues esa fina locura todavía retuvo,
> que todo cerebro de poeta debería poseer.

—Pero no siempre se les notaba, ¿no? —dijo Gwendolen, inocentemente —. Supongo que muchos de ellos deliraban en privado. Los locos son a menudo muy astutos.

De nuevo cruzó una sombra por el rostro de la señora Arrowpoint; mas la entrada de los caballeros previno cualquier desavenencia entre ella y esta joven señorita demasiado rápida, que había sobreactuado su *naïveté*[31].

—Ah, por aquí llega Herr Klesmer —dijo la señora Arrowpoint, levantándose; y tras conducirlo hasta Gwendolen, los dejó enfrascados en una conversación agradable para ambos. Herr Klesmer era una acertada combinación de lo germano, lo eslavo, y lo semita, de grandes rasgos, pelo moreno ondulado de una forma artística, y ojos oscuros tras los anteojos. Su inglés tenía algo de extranjero, salvo su soltura; y su alarmante inteligencia era suavizada justo entonces por un cierto aire de torpeza que a menudo muestran los genios en su deseo de ser agradables a la Belleza.

Pronto comenzó a sonar la música. La señorita Arrowpoint y Herr Klesmer tocaron una pieza a cuatro manos en dos pianos, y los invitados se dieron cuenta enseguida que era larga, y Gwendolen en particular, que la señorita Arrowpoint, neutra y de cara pálida, tenía un dominio del instrumento que no dejaba dudas —aunque ella misma no estaba desalentada por su modo de tocar y su estilo, a menudo muy alabado—. Después de esto, todo el mundo estaba ansioso por oír cantar a Gwendolen, en especial el señor Arrowpoint, como era de esperar en un huésped y perfecto caballero, del que nadie tenía nada que decir excepto que se había casado con la señorita Cutler y que importaba los mejores puros; y la acompañó al piano con delicada

cortesía. Herr Klesmer cerró enseguida el instrumento y sonrió mientras se acercaba; y se situó a una distancia de unos pocos pies para que pudiera verla mientas cantaba.

Gwendolen no estaba nerviosa; todo lo que emprendía lo hacía sin nerviosismo, y cantar era un placer para ella. Su voz era la de una soprano moderadamente potente (alguien le había dicho que era como la de Jenny Lind[32]); su oído fino, era capaz de permanecer en el tono, de forma que su canto complacía a los oyentes corrientes, y estaba acostumbrada al aplauso fervoroso. Tenía la rara ventaja de parecer casi más hermosa cuando cantaba que en otras ocasiones, y no parecía molestarla que Herr Klesmer estuviera enfrente de ella. Su canción, determinada de antemano, era una de las arias más conocidas de Bellini, con la que se sentía muy segura.

—¡Estupendo! —dijo el señor Arrowpoint, que había permanecido cerca, y a la exclamación se sumaron muchos sin más hipocresía que la que reconocemos en las formas fraternales humanas. Pero Herr Klesmer permaneció como una estatua, si se puede imaginar una estatua con anteojos; al menos, estaba tan mudo como una estatua. Gwendolen fue presionada para seguir en su sitio y doblar la dicha de todos, y ella no quería rehusar a ello; pero antes de decidir hacerlo, se movió un poco hacia Herr Klesmer, y le dijo sonriéndole seductivamente—: Sería demasiado cruel para un gran músico. A usted no le puede gustar oír cantar a pobres aficionados.

—No, en serio; no me desagrada —dijo Herr Klesmer, cambiando de repente la forma de hablar a la odiosa manera alemana destacando cada sílaba, algo inusitado en él anteriormente, y que al parecer dependía de un cambio de humor, de la misma forma que los irlandeses retoman su acento natal cuando discuten con fervor—. No me desagrada. Es algo aceptable verla cantar.

¿Hubo alguna vez una manifestación de superioridad tan inesperada, al menos antes de las últimas conquistas teutónicas? Gwendolen se sonrojó profundamente, pero, con su habitual presencia de ánimo, no mostró ningún tipo de resentimiento hostil al retirarse inmediatamente; y la señorita Arrowpoint, que estaba lo suficientemente cerca para haber oído la conversación (además de observar que Herr Klesmer miraba a Gwendolen de una forma visiblemente más de admiración que lo que el buen gusto permitía), se acercó a ella con tacto y delicadeza extremos y le dijo:

—¡Imagine por lo que tengo que pasar con este profesor! Apenas soporta cualquier cosa que hagamos los ingleses en música. Solo podemos sufrir su

severidad, y tratar de sacarle partido y averiguar lo peor que se puede decir de nosotros. Consuela un poco saber eso; y se puede soportar cuando todos los demás nos admiran.

—Debería sentirme agradecida hacia él por haberme dicho lo peor —dijo Gwendolen, recobrando el ánimo—. Debo decir que he sido muy mal enseñada, además de no tener más talento que solo el de gustarme la música. —Lo había expresado muy bien, teniendo en cuenta que nunca lo había pensado.

—Sí, tiene razón; no le han enseñado nada bien —dijo Herr Klesmer, tranquilamente. Le gustaba la mujer, pero más le gustaba la música—. Con todo, a usted no le faltan talentos. Canta a tono, y tiene un órgano muy dulce. Pero produce las notas mal; y esa música que canta está por debajo de usted. Es una forma de melodía que expresa un estado cultural pueril, una especie de balanceo ñoño, la excitación y el pensamiento de personas cortas de miras. Hay una especie de bobería satisfecha de sí misma en cada una de las frases de una melodía así; nada de gritos de profunda y misteriosa pasión, de conflicto; ningún sentimiento universal. Empequeñece a los hombres mientras lo escuchan. Cante ahora algo más valioso. Y ya veremos.

—Oh, ahora no. Dentro de un rato —dijo Gwendolen, un poco abatida por las repentinas críticas que suscitó su pequeña actuación musical. Para una joven deseosa de triunfar, este primer encuentro en su terreno era alarmante. Pero se sentía inclinada a no comportarse tontamente, y la señorita Arrowpoint la ayudó diciendo:

—Sí, dentro de un rato. Yo siempre necesito media hora para reponerme tras ser criticada por Herr Klesmer. Le pediremos que nos toque algo; está preparado para mostrarnos lo que es buena música.

Para estar bien seguro, Herr Klesmer tocó una composición suya, una fantasía llamada *Freudvoll, Leidvoll, Gedankenvoll*[33], un extenso comentario sobre ciertas ideas melódicas no demasiado evidente; y ciertamente le sacó al piano tanta pasión, llena de variedad y profundidad, como se dejó el instrumento, moderadamente sensible. Tenían una magia imperiosa sus dedos, que parecía que enviaran sensaciones nerviosas a través de las teclas de marfil y los martillos de madera, apremiando a las cuerdas a realizar por él un prolongado discurso vibrante. Gwendolen, a pesar de su egoísmo herido, tenía la sensibilidad suficiente para notar el poder de la interpretación, que gradualmente transformó el sollozo interno de la mortificación en una excitación que la elevó por el momento hacia una indiferencia extrema hacia

sus propios logros, o al menos, hacia una determinación a estar por encima de ellos, riéndose de ellos como si pertenecieran a otra persona. Sus ojos se habían vuelto más brillantes, sus mejillas se sonrojaron ligeramente, y su lengua estaba lista para responder a cualquier observación maliciosa.

—Me encantaría que nos cantara de nuevo, señorita Harleth —dijo el joven Clintock, el hijo clásico del archidiácono, que había sido tan afortunado como para llevarla a comer, y retomó la conversación tan pronto como acabó la interpretación de Herr Klesmer—. Ese es mi estilo de música. Nunca saco nada de la música perfecta. Es como esos gusanos que no puedes decir donde empiezan o donde acaban. Podría estar todo el día escuchándola cantar.

—Sí, nos alegraría oír algo popular ahora, otra canción de las suyas nos relajaría —dijo la señora Arrowpoint, que también se había acercado con intención cortés.

Gwendolen, haciendo caso omiso de la señora Arrowpoint, y mirando con una sonrisa brillante al joven Clintock, dijo:

—Eso debe ser porque está usted en un estado cultural pueril y es corto de miras. Acabo de aprender eso. Me han enseñado lo malo que es mi gusto, y me siento cada vez más mal por ello. No es agradable.

La señora Arrowpoint no pasó por alto está descortesía, pero simplemente dijo:

—Bien, no presionaremos por nada desagradable.

Y como por entonces se oía ya un perceptible murmullo de conversación, y los invitados se buscaban unos a otros, permaneció sentada donde estaba, mirando a su alrededor con alivio como anfitriona que se da cuenta que no es necesitada.

—Me alegra que le guste este vecindario —dijo el joven Clintock, encantado de estar ubicado enfrente de Gwendolen.

—Muchísimo. Parece haber un poco de todo y no mucho de algo.

—Eso es un halago más bien ambiguo.

—No para mí. Me gusta un poco de todo; un poco de insensatez, por ejemplo, es muy divertido. Estoy agradecida porque algunas de las personas son curiosas; pero si hubiera muchas sería aburrido.

(La señora Arrowpoint, que estaba oyendo este diálogo, percibió un nuevo tono en las palabras de Gwendolen, y le asaltó de nuevo la duda de su interés en la locura de Tasso).

—Pues yo creo que debería haber más críquet —dijo el joven Clintock—; normalmente estoy fuera, pero si estuviera más aquí, iría a un club de críquet.

Usted está en uno de arqueros, creo. Pero yo pienso que el críquet será el juego del futuro. Requiere que se escriba sobre él, por eso. Uno de nuestros mejores hombres ha escrito un poema sobre él, en cuatro cantos; y es tan bueno como Pope[34]. Quiero que lo publique. Nunca leerá algo mejor.

—Estudiaré críquet mañana. Me empezaré a aplicar al críquet en vez de al canto.

—No, no, eso no; pero empiece a aplicarse al críquet. Le enviaré el poema de Jenning, si quiere. Tengo una copia manuscrita.

—¿Es un gran amigo de usted?

—Bueno, un poco.

—Oh, si solo lo es un poco, creo que lo declinaré. Ahora bien, si me la envía, ¿me promete no catequizarme sobre él y preguntarme qué parte me gusta más? Porque no es fácil conocer un poema sin leerlo como no lo es conocer un sermón sin escucharlo.

«Decididamente —pensó la señora Arrowpoint— esta chica juega doble y es satírica. Deberé vigilar».

Pero Gwendolen, no obstante, continuó recibiendo atenciones corteses de la familia de Quetcham, no solo porque las invitaciones tienen motivos más profundos que los de los gustos personales, sino porque la engorrosa escena del piano había despertado un vivo interés hacia ella en la mente de la señorita Arrowpoint, quien se ocupaba de todas las invitaciones y visitas, al estar su madre ocupada en otras cosas.

Capítulo 6

Croyez-vous m'avoir humiliée pour m'avoir appris que la terre tourne autour du soleil? Je vous jure que je ne m'en estime pas moins.

FONTENELLE, *Pluralité des Mondes*[35]

AQUELLA CRÍTICA SUBLIME HABÍA CAUSADO A GWENDOLEN UNA NUEVA FORMA DE aflicción. No habría querido confesar lo infeliz que se sentía por no tener las aptitudes musicales de la señorita Arrowpoint para poder cuestionar el gusto de Herr Klesmer con la seguridad de un conocimiento pleno; y aún menos admitir incluso ante sí misma que la señorita Arrowpoint, cada vez que se encontraban, suscitaba en ella un insólito sentimiento de envidia; no era ni mucho menos porque ella fuera una heredera, sino porque era realmente provocador que una chica cuya apariencia no podría caracterizarse sino diciendo que tenía una figura endeble y de media estatura, de rasgos pequeños, ojos mediocres y complexión pálida, tuviera sin embargo cierta superioridad mental que no podía ser explicada —un dominio exasperante de su técnica musical, una selección quisquillosa de sus gustos—, lo que hacía imposible forzar su admiración, mientras que le mantenía a uno asombrado. Esta aparentemente insignificante joven de veinticuatro años, a la que nadie habría hecho mucho caso si no hubiera sido la señorita Arrowpoint, podía esconder la opinión secreta de que los logros de la señorita Harleth fueran más bien ordinarios; y no era agradable pensar que esa opinión se encubriera siempre bajo una perfecta compostura.

Pero a Gwendolen no le gustaba detenerse a pensar en hechos que no la dejaran demasiado bien. El mago musical que había ampliado de repente su horizonte no estaba siempre en escena; y el estar siempre yendo y viniendo entre Londres y Quetcham pronto le hizo pensar que eso lo iba a convertir en una mente más admirada. Mientras, sabiendo lo mucho que había gustado su actuación en el Castillo Brackenshaw, en casa de los Firs, y en los demás sitios, recobró su entereza, creyendo que la aprobación era más fiable que la objeción; además, no era una de esas personas excepcionales que tienen una sed abrasadora de perfección, no siendo además requerida por sus vecinos. Quizás habría sido precipitado decir entonces que fuera enteramente excepcional interiormente, o que lo inusual en ella era algo más que su

extraña y graciosa forma de moverse y comportarse, y cierto atrevimiento que añadía picardía a una ambición egoísta muy común, como la que existe bajo muchas apariencias externas torpes y a las que no se hace mucho caso. Pues supongo que el hecho de sentar la cabeza no determina realmente el deseo del yo interior por la supremacía: solo marca a veces una diferencia en la forma en que la supremacía se mantiene alcanzable, y también un poco el grado en que esta puede ser alcanzada; sobre todo, cuando el deseo es el de una chica cuya pasión por hacer cosas remarcables no tiene más límites que el de mantener las buenas formas y ser completamente libre de la sórdida necesidad de unos ingresos. Gwendolen se rebelaba interiormente contra las ataduras de la condición familiar, y miraba sus obligaciones sin motivación, como si estuviera convencida de sus especulaciones más atrevidas. Sin embargo, no había pensado realmente en tales especulaciones, y se habría desmarcado inmediatamente de cualquier tipo de feminismo teórico o práctico, satirizando a tales mujeres. Se regocijaba sintiéndose excepcional; pero sus expectativas eran las de la novela romántica en la que el alma de la heroína reflejada en su diario está llena de un amplio poder, originalidad, y una rebelión general, mientras que su vida se mueve estrictamente en el ámbito mundano; y si camina por una ciénaga, el patetismo reside en parte, por así decir, en que lleva zapatos pulidos. He aquí una restricción que la naturaleza y la sociedad han construido cuando se persiguen aventuras insólitas; de forma que un alma que arde con una fuerza que no tiene el universo, y dispuesta a sacar el máximo partido de toda existencia, se ve sin embargo, prisionera del entretejido ordinario de las formas sociales y no hace nada en particular.

Con este desenlace trivial era con lo que Gwendolen se encontró amenazada incluso en la novedad de su primer invierno en Offendene. Tenía muy claro que no quería llevar el mismo tipo de vida que llevaban las señoritas jóvenes ordinarias. Pero lo que no tenía tan claro era cómo podía conseguir llevar otro tipo de vida, y qué era lo que tenía hacer para asegurar su libertad. Offendene seguía siendo un buen sitio, si algo pasara allí, pero el vecindario dejaba mucho que desear.

Más allá del efecto de su belleza en su primera presentación, no había mucho más que sacar de sus primeras invitaciones, y volvía a casa tras haber dado algunas muestras de sátira y sarcasmo, como las que habían ofendido a la señora Arrowpoint, para evitar aburrirse durante los días intermedios. La manifestación más fuerte de sus demandas individuales que fue capaz de hacer fue la de dejar las clases de Alice (justificando que era más probable

que Alice triunfara en su ignorancia), ofreciéndole que ayudara a la señorita Merry y a la criada que servía a todas las señoras, ayudándolas a zurcir varios vestidos de disfraces que Gwendolen deseaba tener listos para futuras ocasiones en que actuaran haciendo mímica o piezas de teatro, ocasiones que pensaba provocar a fuerza de voluntad o de artificio. Nunca había actuado, solo había hecho de figura en unos *tableaux vivants*[36] en la escuela; pero estaba segura que podía actuar bien, y habiendo estado una o dos veces en el Théâtre Français, y oído a su madre hablar de Raquel[37], los nuevos sueños y las reflexiones de qué haría con su destino se volvían de vez en cuando hacia la cuestión de si se convertiría en una actriz como Raquel, dado que ella era más hermosa que esa judía esquelética. Mientras, los húmedos días anteriores a Navidad, pasaron agradablemente, preparando vestidos griegos, orientales y clásicos, en los que Gwendolen ensayó papeles y discursos ante una audiencia doméstica, incluyendo a la ama de llaves, a la que se presionó una vez incluso a que prolongara los aplausos; pero habiéndose mostrado indigna al observar que la señorita Harleth parecía más una reina en sus vestidos normales que con esas cosas que le iban tan sueltas y que dejaban sus brazos al desnudo, no fue invitada ya una segunda vez.

—¿Estoy tan bien como Raquel, mamá? —dijo Gwendolen un día que se había lucido con su vestido griego ante Anna, interpretando ciertos fragmentos con gran intención dramática.

—Tienes mejores brazos que Raquel —dijo la señora Davilow—; podrías interpretar lo que quisieras con esos brazos, Gwen. Pero tu voz no es tan trágica como la de ella; no es tan profunda.

—La puedo hacer más profunda, si quiero —dijo Gwendolen al momento; luego, añadió con decisión—: Creo que una voz más aguda es más trágica: es más femenina; y cuanto más femenina es una mujer, tanto más trágica parece cuando realiza acciones desesperadas.

—Puede que tengas razón en eso —dijo la señora Davilow sin mucho ánimo—. Pero no entiendo qué hay de bueno en asustar así a la gente. Y si hay que hacer algo terrible, es mejor dejárselo hacer a los hombres.

—¡Oh, mamá, eres tan espantosamente insulsa! ¡Como si todas las grandes criminales apasionadas no fueran mujeres! Creo que los hombres son pobres criaturas cautelosas.

—Bueno, querida, y tú, que tienes miedo de estar sola por la noche, no creo que fueras muy atrevida en un crimen, gracias a Dios.

—No estoy hablando de la realidad, mamá —se impacientó Gwendolen. Luego, al ser su madre requerida fuera de la sala, se dirigió enseguida a su prima, como aprovechando la oportunidad, y dijo—: Anna, ve a pedir a mi tío que nos deje preparar una función de mímica en la rectoría. El señor Middleton y Warham podrían actuar con nosotras, solo por practicar. Mamá dice que el señor Middleton no sirve para asesorarnos ni para ensayar. Es un poco aburrido, pero podríamos darle papeles adecuados. Ve a pedírselo, o si no iré yo.

—Oh, no hasta que venga Rex. Es tan inteligente, y tan entrañable, y actuará como Napoleón mirando al mar. Se parece tanto a Napoleón. Rex puede hacer cualquier cosa.

—No me fío para nada de tu Rex, Anna —dijo Gwendolen, riéndose de ella—. Acabará convirtiéndose en una de esas pésimas acuarelas suyas de colores azul y amarillo que cuelgas en tu habitación y que tanto adoras.

—Muy bien, ya verás —dijo Anna—. No es que yo sepa lo que es ser inteligente, pero ha finalizado ya sus estudios escolares y tiene una beca para la Universidad, y nadie es mejor que él en los juegos. Es más inteligente que el señor Middleton y todo el mundo menos tú dice que el señor Middleton es inteligente.

—Puede que lo sea, pero no brilla en absoluto. Es muy aburrido. Si tuviera que decir: «¡Qué la perdición se apodere de mi alma si no te quiero!»[38], lo diría en el mismo tono que: «Aquí acaba la segunda lección».

—¡Oh, Gwendolen! —exclamó Anna, asombrada por la mezcla de estas alusiones—. Te muestras muy desagradecida al hablar así de él cuando te admira tanto. Oí un día que Warham decía a mamá: «Middleton ha perdido la cabeza por Gwendolen». Ella se enfadó mucho con él; pero yo ya sé lo que quiere decir. Es lo que se dice en la universidad cuando alguien está enamorado.

—¿Cómo puedo evitarlo? —dijo Gwendolen, más bien con desprecio. «Que la perdición se apodere de mi alma si le quiero».

—No, claro; papá, supongo, no lo querría. Y se va a ir pronto. Pero me sabe mal que lo ridiculices.

—¿Qué me harás cuando ridiculice a Rex? —dijo Gwendolen con malicia.

—Por favor, Gwendolen, querida, no lo harás, ¿verdad? —dijo Anna con los ojos empañados de lágrimas—. No podría soportarlo. Además, no hay nada en él para ridiculizar. Solo tú podrías encontrarle algo. Pues nadie antes

que tú había pensado en reírse del señor Middleton. Todo el mundo decía que era agradable y de buenas maneras. Estoy segura de que siempre le he temido por sus clases y por su sombrero de copa, y por ser sobrino del obispo y todo eso. Pero no ridiculizarás a Rex, prométemelo —Anna terminó con una mirada imploradora que conmovió a Gwendolen.

—Eres una primita encantadora —dijo, pellizcándole a Anna el mentón —. No quiero hacer nada que te moleste. Sobre todo si Rex consigue que todo se lleve a cabo, la mímica y todo.

Y cuando por fin vino Rex, la animación que trajo a la vida de Offendene y la rectoría, y la rapidez con que encajó en los planes de Gwendolen, no le permitieron ridiculizarlo de ninguna forma que no fuera de una manera abierta y lisonjera, como a él mismo le gustaba. Era un joven de corazón abierto, con una cara hermosa que se asemejaba mucho a la de su padre y al de Anna, aunque con la expresión más suave por una parte y con más robustez por otra: un temperamento brillante, sano y cariñoso, que disfrutaba tanto de las cosas inocentes ordinarias que el vicio no le tentaba, y lo que sabía de él permanecía en las profundidades más recónditas de su mente de forma que pensar en ello le producía una gran repulsión. Los hábitos viciosos eran para él «lo que algunos compañeros hacían», «cosas estúpidas» de las que quería mantenerse al margen. Correspondía al afecto de Anna tan plenamente como podía esperarse de un hermano que se complacía, además de en ella, en muchas más de las cosas que a ella le gustaban; y nunca había conocido un amor más fuerte.

Los primos estaban continuamente juntos en casa de uno o de otro, principalmente en Offendene, donde había más libertad, o más bien donde Gwendolen podía mostrar mejor su dominio; y cualquier cosa que ella deseara se convertía en objeto de acatamiento para Rex. Las funciones de mímica se desarrollaron de acuerdo con sus planes; y también algunas otras pequeñas escenas no previstas por ella en las que su actuación pudo ser más espontánea. Fue en Offendene donde se ensayaron y se presentaron las funciones de mímica y los cuadros vivientes, al no ver ninguna objeción la señora Davilow incluso a que el señor Middleton fuera invitado a participar en ellas, ahora que Rex también estaba allí —siendo sus servicios indispensables—. Warham, que estaba estudiando para la India con un preparador de Wancester, no disponía de tiempo para ellos, y mostraba generalmente una actitud sombría por la cantidad de cosas que había estado estudiando, prácticamente todo salvo las respuestas necesarias para el examen próximo, que a juzgar por

su estudio, bien podía revelar que el bienestar de nuestro Imperio Indio estuviera relacionado con un conocimiento preciso de las Pastorales de Browne.

El señor Middleton fue persuadido para representar papeles serios, pues Gwendolen lo había adulado sobre su envidiable rostro inmutable; y aunque al principio estuviera un poco dolido y celoso de la amistad que ella mostraba con Rex, pronto se animó con el pensamiento de que este tipo de familiaridad entre primos excluía cualquier tipo de pasión más seria. De hecho, en ocasiones sentía que el trato más formal que ella le dirigía era como un signo de favor para que él hiciera progresos antes de dejar Pennicote, aunque él prefería no desvelar sus sentimientos hasta que no pudiera asegurar un poco más su posición. La señorita Gwendolen, bastante consciente de ser adorada por este joven clérigo intachable de barba pobre y cuello cuadrado, lo único que sintió sobre el asunto es que no tenía objeción alguna en ser adorada: volvía sus ojos sobre él despiadadamente y le causó muchas suaves y agitadas esperanzas al querer siempre evitar contacto dramático con él —pues cualquier significado, sabemos, depende del modo de interpretación—.

Algunas personas podrían haber pensado de antemano que para un joven de inclinaciones anglicanas, con un sentido de lo sagrado ejercitado tanto en las cosas pequeñas como en las grandes, que apenas reía excepto por cortesía, y que, en general, consideraba decir las cosas por su nombre como algo ordinario, no fuera una mujer adecuada para él una chica que fuera atrevida en extremo y que no mostrara ninguna de las cualidades especiales requeridas en la mujer de un clérigo; o que un joven instruido con lecturas teológicas probablemente no iba a encontrarle el gusto a una joven señorita inquieta y vivaracha como la señorita Harleth. ¿Pero estamos siempre obligados a explicar por qué los hechos no son como los pensaron otros de antemano? La disculpa debe hallarse en su terreno, pues ellos son los que tenían un modo de pensar equivocado.

En cuanto a Rex, que habría sentido lástima del pobre Middleton si hubiera sido consciente del conflicto interior del eminente clérigo, estaba completamente absorbido por una pasión principal como para observar cualquier otra persona o cosa. No observaba a Gwendolen; solo sentía lo que ella decía o hacía, y la parte trasera de su cabeza parecía ser un buen órgano de información para saber si ella se hallaba o no en la sala. Antes de finalizar la primera quincena estaba tan profundamente enamorado que era imposible que pensara que su vida no fuera a estar atada a la de Gwendolen. No veía

impedimentos, pobre chico; su propio amor le parecía una garantía del de ella, pues era un amor que contemplaba con encanto imperturbado su imagen, de forma que no podía imaginar que ella fuera a causarle dolor de la misma forma que un egipcio no podía imaginarse la nieve. Ella le cantaba y actuaba siempre que él quería, estaba contenta de su compañía a caballo, aunque los corceles que tomaba prestados eran a menudo ridículos, se unía siempre a cualquier observación graciosa suya, y mostraba un sincero aprecio hacia Anna. No parecía que faltara ninguna señal de simpatía. Que al ser Gwendolen la más perfecta de las criaturas del mundo, iba a conseguir un matrimonio perfecto, no se le había ni ocurrido. No tenía ninguna presunción —al menos, no más que la necesaria para dar consistencia a una personalidad sustancial—: solo que en el joven ardor de su amor, tomó la perfección de Gwendolen como parte del bien que siempre le había rodeado, como consecuencia de su naturaleza dichosa y bondadosa.

Un suceso que ocurrió durante el transcurso de sus ensayos dramáticos impresionó a Rex, como prueba de su natural sensibilidad. En ese suceso se mostró un aspecto de la personalidad de ella que no podía haber sido preconcebido por nadie que, como él, solo había visto su intrepidez habitual en ejercicios activos y su buen humor en sociedad.

Tras una buena cantidad de ensayos, se decidió que un grupo selecto fuera invitado a Offendene para presenciar las actuaciones que transcurrían con tanta satisfacción para los actores. Anna les había causado una agradable sorpresa; la forma en la que representaba sus papeles no podía ser más perfecta; podía incluso sospecharse que tras su simplicidad se escondía una aguda observación. Y el señor Middleton hizo bien en no intentar hacer un papel cómico. La principal causa de incertidumbre y retraso fue el deseo de Gwendolen de aparecer con su vestido griego. No acababa de encontrar qué función era la más adecuada para conseguir su propósito de resaltar su figura con su vestido favorito. Escoger una obra de Racine no serviría de nada, pues ni Rex ni los demás sabían declamar el verso francés, e improvisar discursos convertiría la escena en algo burlesco. Además, el señor Gascoigne prohibía que se representaran escenas de obras de teatro: estaba normalmente en contra de la noción que un divertimento que era adecuado para todos, no lo fuera para un clérigo; pero no iba a consentir sobrepasar en esto la línea del decoro como se hacía en esa parte de Wessex, lo que no excluía que aprobara que los jóvenes hicieran pantomimas en casa de su cuñada —un asunto muy diferente al de las obras de teatro privadas en el pleno sentido de la expresión—.

Por supuesto todo el mundo se preocupó por satisfacer el deseo de Gwendolen, y Rex propuso que podrían arreglarlo con un cuadro en el que el efecto de su majestad no fuera deslucido por el discurso de nadie. Esta idea la agradó por completo, y lo único que faltaba era buscar un cuadro.

—Algo agradable, chicos, os lo ruego —dijo la señora Davilow—. No soporto las crueldades griegas.

—No son peores que las cristianas, mamá —dijo Gwendolen, a la que la mención de las heroínas raquelescas había suscitado tal observación.

—Y menos escandalosas —dijo Rex—. Además, uno piensa en ellas como algo ya pasado. ¿Qué opináis del secuestro de Briseida?[39]. Yo sería Aquiles, y vosotros estarías mirando alrededor mío tras el grabado que tenemos en la rectoría.

—Esa sería una buena escena para mí —dijo Gwendolen, en un tono de aceptación. Pero luego replicó con decisión—: No, no servirá. Tienen que haber tres hombres con los vestidos adecuados, si no, sería ridículo.

—¡Ya lo tengo! —dijo Rex, tras una breve reflexión—. ¡Hermione como estatua en el Cuento de Invierno![40]. Yo seré Leontes, y la señorita Merry, Paulina, uno en cada lado. Nuestros vestidos no significan mucho —continuó riendo—: será más shakespeariano y romántico si Leontes parece Napoleón y Paulina una solterona moderna.

Y escogieron Hermione; todos estuvieron de acuerdo en que la edad era lo de menos; pero Gwendolen propuso que en lugar de representar solo el cuadro, debía haber algo de actuación para introducir el lanzamiento de la música como signo para que ella comenzara a descender avanzando poco a poco; luego Leontes, en lugar de abrazarla, se arrodillaría ante ella y le besaría el dobladillo de su falda, y caería el telón. La antecámara de puertas abatibles resultaba ideal para convertirse en escenario, y todo el personal, además de Jarret, el carpintero local, estuvieron ocupados en preparar un entretenimiento que, considerando que era la imitación de una actuación, iba a resultar exitoso, pues sabemos por fábulas antiguas que una imitación tiene más probabilidades de éxito que el original.

A Gwendolen le invadía una emoción especial ante la expectativa de esta ocasión, pues sabía que Herr Klesmer estaba de nuevo en Quetcham, y había tomado la precaución de inculirlo entre los invitados.

Klesmer vino. Se mostraba reservado, como de costumbre, y se sentó contemplando serenamente la escena, respondiendo a todos los requerimientos con sílabas complacientes, más o menos articuladas —como si

cargara humildemente con su cruz en un mundo poblado de aficionados, o como si moviera cuidadosamente sus zarpas de león para no pisar a un ratón furioso y chillón.

Todo se desarrolló de forma natural y según lo previsto —teniendo en cuenta que casi todo era improvisado y accidental— hasta que ocurrió el incidente que descubrió un estado de emoción nunca visto en Gwendolen. Cómo sucedió fue al principio un misterio.

La representación de Hermione era doblemente llamativa por su disimilitud con lo que había sido representado anteriormente: estaba funcionando perfectamente, y los aplausos fueron apagándose gradualmente mientras Leontes daba permiso para que Paulina mostrara sus habilidades artísticas e hiciera mover la estatua.

Hermione, con un brazo descansando sobre una columna, estaba elevada unas seis pulgadas[41], espacio suficiente para mostrar su hermoso pie y empeine, y debía avanzar y descender ante la señal establecida.

—¡Música, ruge, despiértala! —dijo Paulina (la señora Davilow, a quien las insistentes súplicas la habían convencido para tomar parte con una túnica blanca y una capucha).

Herr Klesmer, que había sido lo bastante condescendiente como para sentarse él mismo al piano, atacó un acorde fuertemente, pero al mismo tiempo, y antes que Hermione hubiera descendido su pie, el panel móvil del entablado, que estaba alineado con el piano, se abrió en el lado opuesto al escenario y descubrió la imagen del rostro del cadáver y el cuerpo que lo acompañaba, envueltos en pálida luminosidad debido a la posición de las velas. Todo el mundo se asustó, pero todos los ojos que fijaron la vista en el panel abierto se volvieron atraídos por un grito de Gwendolen, que permanecía sin cambiar de actitud, pero con un cambio de expresión que era terrorífico en su terror. Parecía una estatua en la que hubiera entrado el alma del Miedo: sus pálidos labios estaban partidos; sus ojos, normalmente encogidos ante sus largos párpados, estaban dilatados y fijos. Su madre, menos sorprendida que alarmada, se precipitó hacia ella, y tampoco Rex pudo evitar correr a su lado. Pero el contacto con el brazo de su madre tuvo el efecto de una descarga eléctrica; Gwendolen cayó de rodillas y se tapó la cara con las manos. Todavía temblaba, aunque en silencio, y parecía que tenía la suficiente consciencia de sí misma como para pretender controlar sus signos de espanto, pues al final se dejó levantar y llevar fuera, mientras los demás se reponían del susto mediante explicaciones.

—¡Un dibujo magnífico, ese! —dijo Klesmer a la señorita Arrowpoint. Y se desató un rápido murmullo de preguntas y respuestas.

—¿Era parte de la representación?

—Oh, no, por supuesto que no. La señorita Harleth estaba muy afectada. ¡Una criatura sensible!

—¡Madre mía! No me había dado cuenta que hubiera una pintura detrás del panel; ¿y usted?

—No, ¿cómo iba a darme cuenta? Una excentricidad de algún conde de la familia de hace tiempo, supongo.

—¡Qué horror! Por favor, callad ya.

—¿Estaba cerrada con llave la puerta del panel? Es muy misterioso. Deben ser los espíritus.

—Pero no hay ningún médium presente.

—¿Cómo sabes eso? Es de esperar que haya alguno si ocurren estas cosas.

—Oh, la puerta no estaba cerrada con llave; probablemente fue la fuerte vibración del piano que la abrió.

A esta conclusión llegó el señor Gascoigne, que pidió a la señorita Merry si podía conseguir la llave. Pero la señora Vulcany pensó que esta prontitud en explicar el misterio no era propio de un clérigo, y observó por lo bajo que el señor Gascoigne era siempre un poco demasiado mundano para su gusto. Sin embargo, se halló la llave, y el rector la introdujo en la cerradura girándola con un énfasis casi ofensivo —como diciendo «No volverá a abrirse de nuevo»— tras lo cual puso la llave en su bolsillo como medida de seguridad.

Sin embargo, pronto reapareció Gwendolen, mostrando su estado de ánimo habitual, y notoriamente resuelta a ignorar en la medida de lo posible el llamativo cambio que había hecho en el papel de Hermione.

Pero cuando Klesmer le dijo: «Tenemos que agradecerle que haya ingeniado un clímax tan perfecto: no podía haber elegido un mejor dibujo», ella se sonrojó de placer. Le gustaba aceptar como verdadero un amable cumplido. Él adivinaba que la traición de sus sentimientos de terror la mortificaban, y deseaba que ella entendiera que él lo tomaba por buena actuación. Gwendolen se deleitaba con la idea de que ahora él estaba conmovido tanto por su talento como por su belleza, y su preocupación por su opinión se tornó en cierto modo en complacencia.

Pero demasiados sabían lo que se había incluido en los ensayos y lo que no, y nadie más además de Klesmer quiso arriesgarse a aliviar la supuesta

mortificación de Gwendolen. El sentimiento general era de dejar de pensar en el incidente.

En realidad, hubo una médium relacionada con la apertura del panel: una que había abandonado a toda prisa la sala y se metió en la cama llena de remordimientos. Era la pequeña Isabel, cuya intensa curiosidad, insatisfecha por la breve ojeada que había hecho a la extraña pintura el día de su llegada a Offendene, la había mantenido a la espera de una oportunidad de hallar dónde había puesto la llave Gwendolen, de robarla del cajón en el que la había descubierto cuando el resto de la familia estuvo fuera, y de apoderarse de un taburete para dejar abierto el panel. Mientras satisfacía su sed de conocimiento de esta manera, la alarmó un ruido que temió fuese de unos pasos que se acercaban; cerró la puerta e intentó cerrarla apresuradamente con la llave, pero al no acertar y no atreverse a demorarse, sacó la llave y confió en que el panel aguantaría sujeto a la pared, como bien parecía. Con esta confianza, devolvió la llave a su sitio, acallando cualquier inquietud al respecto con el pensamiento de que si se descubría que la puerta de la pared no estaba cerrada con llave nadie sabría por qué. La inoportuna Isabel, como les sucede a otros culpables, no preveía que su propio impulso la llevaría a confesar, algo que le ocurrió a la mañana siguiente de la fiesta, cuando Gwendolen dijo en el desayuno:

—Sé que la puerta estaba cerrada con la llave antes de que me la entregara el ama de llaves, pues yo mismo intenté abrirla. Alguien ha debido ir a mi cajón y la ha cogido.

A Isabel le pareció que los terribles ojos de Gwendolen se fijaron más en ella que en el resto de sus hermanas, y sin tiempo para pensar, dijo temblando:

—Por favor, perdóname, Gwendolen.

El perdón se otorgó más pronto de lo que habría sido si Gwendolen no hubiera deseado que desapareciera de su memoria y de la de todos los demás un suceso en el que había mostrado su susceptibilidad al espanto. Se sorprendía de sí misma en estas experiencias ocasionales, que parecían breves momentos de locura, inexplicables excepciones de su vida normal; y en esta ocasión le mortificaba especialmente el hecho de que esta impotente sensación de miedo hubiera surgido, no como sucedía normalmente, en soledad, sino en compañía y a plena luz. Su ideal era ser audaz en la palabra y temeraria en bravos peligros, tanto morales como físicos; y aunque en la práctica estaba muy lejos de su ideal, esta limitación parecía deberse a la insignificancia de sus circunstancias, al estrecho margen que ofrece la vida a

una chica de veinte años, que no llega a imaginarse que pueda ser otra cosa que una dama, o estar en una posición social en la que no la respetaran. No tenía plena consciencia de que la encadenaran otros temas, ni siquiera espirituales, pues siempre la había desagradado lo que se le presentaba bajo el nombre de la religión, del mismo modo que algunas personas detestan la aritmética y el cálculo: no le habían suscitado ninguna emoción, ninguna ansiedad, ningún anhelo; así que la cuestión de si creía no se le había ocurrido, de la misma forma que no se le había ocurrido averiguar las condiciones de las propiedades coloniales y de la banca, sobre las que, como había tenido muchas oportunidades de conocer, la fortuna de su familia dependía. Habría admitido enseguida todos estos hechos sobre sí misma, e incluso, más o menos indirectamente, los habría manifestado. Lo que reconocía a despecho y que no habría querido que nadie se diera cuenta era estar sujeta a ataques de pavor espiritual, si bien el origen de esos temores no estaba relacionado con lo que había aprendido de la religión o de las relaciones humanas. Se avergonzaba y temía qué podía suceder de nuevo, al recordar su temor al sentirse de repente sola, cuando, por ejemplo, caminaba sin compañía y había un repentino cambio de luz. Sentir la soledad en un entorno amplio la impresionaba con un sentimiento indefinido de inconmensurable existencia fuera de ella, en medio de la cual se sentía impotentemente incapaz de afirmar su propia personalidad. Lo poco que le enseñaron de astronomía en la escuela solía, en ocasiones, poner en funcionamiento su imaginación de un forma que la hacía temblar; pero cuando alguien se unía a ella, recobraba su indiferencia hasta el punto de parecer una exiliada; encontraba de nuevo su propio mundo donde su voluntad le era útil, y la nomenclatura religiosa que hacía referencia a este mundo no le producía una mayor impresión inquieta de sobrecogimiento que la que sentía al ver las anticuadas casullas de su tío en la rectoría. Ante la presencia de más gente, siempre hasta ahora había recobrado el ánimo, y sentía la posibilidad de reponerse. Ante su mamá y otras personas sus ataques de retraimiento y terror se explicaban suficientemente por su «sensibilidad» o «por la excitabilidad de su naturaleza»; pero había que conciliar estas expresiones aclaratorias con lo que parecía una absoluta indiferencia o un extraño dominio de sí. El estado ardiente es una expresión muy útil: puede hacer referencia a cierto grado de calor atmosférico, y para aplicarlo correctamente requiere un perfecto conocimiento de las diferencias térmicas; o puede explicar la «sensibilidad» del carácter, lo que requiere también un

conocimiento semejante. Pero, ¿quién es el que, amando a una criatura como Gwendolen, no estaría predispuesto a tomar cada peculiaridad de ella como un signo de preeminencia? Eso es lo que Rex hizo. Tras la escena de Hermione, estaba más persuadido que nunca que ella debía estar llena de todo sentimiento, y no solo dispuesta a responder a un amor de veneración, sino a amar mejor que otras chicas. Rex sentía el verano en su joven ánimo y se elevó feliz sobre estos pensamientos.

Capítulo 7

PERIGOT: As the bonny lasse passed by,
WILLIE: Hey, ho, bonnilasse!
P: She roode at me with glauncing eye,
W: As clear as the crystal glasse.
P: All as the sunny beame so bright,
W: Hey, ho, the sunnebeame!
P: Glaunceth from Phoebus' face forthright,
W: So love into thy heart

SPENSER, *Shepheards Calendar*[42]

El síntoma más benigno, aunque la crisis más alarmante del sensible estado de la juventud; el que nutre y devora habilidades prometedoras; (…) la esclavitud sobre la libertad; la amable religión de la mente; la superstición liberal.

CHARLES LAMB

EL PRIMER SIGNO DE LA TORMENTA DE NIEVE QUE NO SE ESPERA ES LA NUBE BLANCA transparente que parece partir el cielo azul. Anna conocía el secreto de los sentimientos de Rex, aunque por primera vez en sus vidas, él no le había comentado nada sobre lo que más le absorbía, y simplemente tomó por hecho que ella lo sabía. Por primera vez, también, Anna no podía decir a Rex lo que continuamente estaba en su mente. Él pronto cuidaría de alguien más que de ella, y quizás habría sentido una pena que habría tenido que ocultar, si tal sentimiento no hubiera sido completamente neutralizado por la duda y la ansiedad que sentía por lo que podía sucederle a él. Anna admiraba a su prima, habría dicho simplemente con sencilla sinceridad: «Gwendolen siempre es muy buena conmigo», y era el estado natural de las cosas el que ella estuviera sometida a su prima; pero la miraba con una mezcla de miedo y desconfianza, la contemplaba desconcertada como si fuera un animal asombroso y hermoso cuya naturaleza fuera un misterio, y que, por lo que Anna conocía, podía apetecerle devorar a todas las pequeñas criaturas que fueran sus propias mascotas. Y ahora, el corazón de Anna se hundía bajo la fuerte convicción que no se atrevía a exteriorizar: que Gwendolen nunca cuidaría de Rex. Lo que ella miraba con ternura y reverencia había parecido siempre indiferente a Gwendolen, y era más fácil imaginársela despreciando a Rex que devolviéndole su afecto. Además, ella siempre estaba pensando ser

alguien extraordinaria. ¡Pobre Rex! Papá se enfadaría con él, si lo supiera. Y por supuesto, era demasiado joven para estar enamorado de esa manera; y ella, Anna, había pensado que pasarían muchos años antes de que algo así ocurriera, y que cuidaría de Rex por mucho tiempo. ¡Pero qué tipo de corazón había de ser el que no le devolviera su amor! Anna, ante la expectativa de su sufrimiento, estaba empezando a detestar a su tan fascinante prima.

A ella le parecía, al igual que a Rex, que durante las últimas semanas habían llevado una vida ajetreada que se había puesto de manifiesto ante cualquier observador: si a él le hubieran preguntado sobre el tema, habría dicho que no tenía intención de esconder lo que esperaba sería un compromiso, del que inmediatamente haría partícipe a su padre; pero aún así, por primera vez en su vida se mostraba reservado no solo sobre sus sentimientos, sino además —lo que para Anna era más remarcable— sobre ciertas acciones. Ella, por su parte, se ponía nerviosa cada vez que su padre o su madre empezaban a hablarle en privado, no fuera que le dijeran algo sobre Rex y Gwendolen. Pero los mayores no eran lo más mínimo conscientes de este drama alarmante, que avanzaba principalmente como una especie de pantomima, extremadamente lúcida para los que la expresaban, pero que pasaba desapercibida para los espectadores, que preferían dirigir la vista hacia e l *Guardian* o el *Clerical Gazette*, y no prestaban más atención a las trivialidades de los jóvenes que a los movimientos de las hormigas.

—¿Dónde vas, Rex? —dijo Anna una mañana gris en la que su padre y la señora Gascoigne habían salido en el carruaje a las sesiones, y en la que había observado que su hermano se había puesto las protecciones contra el barro en la pierna, lo más cercano que tenía a un equipo de caza.

—Voy a ver cómo sueltan a los galgos en los Tres Graneros.

—¿Te vas a llevar a Gwendolen? —dijo Anna tímidamente.

—Te lo ha dicho ella, ¿verdad?

—No, pero pensé que… ¿Sabe papá que vas a ir?

—No que yo sepa. No creo que le preocupe mucho.

—¿Vas a usar su caballo?

—Ya sabe que lo hago siempre que puedo.

—No dejes que Gwendolen vaya a caballo tras los galgos, Rex —dijo Anna, cuyos temores le proporcionaban una especie de clarividencia.

—¿Por qué no? —dijo Rex, sonriendo casi provocativamente.

—Ni papá ni mama ni la tía Davilow quieren que lo haga. Creen que no es apropiado para ella.

—¿Por qué supones que va a hacer lo que no es apropiado?

—A Gwendolen no le importa nadie a veces —dijo Anna, en un tono más atrevido, pues se iba irritando por momentos.

—Entonces no le importaré yo —dijo Rex, burlándose perversamente de la ansiedad de Anna.

—Oh, Rex. No lo soporto. Te harás un desdichado. —En este punto Anna rompió a llorar.

—Nannie, Nannie, ¿qué es lo que te pasa? —dijo Rex, algo impaciente al ser entretenido de esta forma, con el sombrero ya puesto y el látigo en la mano.

—No te cuidará lo más mínimo. ¡Sé que nunca lo hará! —susurró la pobre chica con un sollozo. Había perdido por completo el control de sí misma.

Rex se puso rojo y salió apresuradamente por el recibidor, dejándola con la miserable consciencia de haberse puesto en contra en vano.

Pensó en sus palabras mientras cabalgaba; tenían el mal gusto que toda predicción desafortunada lleva consigo, incluso aunque uno se riera de ellas; pero pronto se dio cuenta de que provenían de la ternura de la pequeña Anna, y le supo mal tener que marcharse sin poder consolarla. Sin embargo, se opuso claramente a ella sobre cualquier otro sentimiento al respecto, tratando de convencerse en su interior que él estaba en lo cierto. Este tipo de certeza era tan familiar como para desconfiar y tan inquietante como para apresurarse a confesar la verdad, cosa que una seguridad intacta habría retrasado.

Gwendolen ya estaba encima del caballo y paseaba arriba y abajo de la avenida cuando Rex apareció en la puerta. Para evitar la decepción en caso de que él no apareciera a tiempo, tenía listo el mozo de caballos tras ella, puesto que no habría esperado más de un tiempo razonable. Ahora pues, enviaron de vuelta al mozo y los dos marcharon encantados de su libertad. Gwendolen estaba de su mejor humor, y Rex pensó que ella nunca había parecido tan hermosa: su rostro, su largo cuello blanco y las curvas de sus mejillas y su barbilla eran realzadas hasta la perfección por la compacta sencillez de su traje de montar. No podía imaginarse a una chica más perfecta; y cuando uno es un amante adolescente como lo era Rex, parece que la identidad fundamental del bien, la verdad y la belleza, existe y se manifiesta en el objeto de su amor. Casi todo el mundo habría considerado más que razonable que una chica tuviera semejantes impresiones acerca de Rex, pues en su apuesto rostro no se veía ni una traza de maldad, ni siquiera heredada de

algún antepasado —cosa que hizo que algunos vacilaran en su admiración por Gwendolen—.

Era una exquisita mañana de enero, en la que no había amenaza alguna de lluvia, sino un cielo gris que suponía el trasfondo más tranquilo para las delicias de una suave escena de invierno: las franjas de los caminos cubiertas de hierba, los setos salpicados de frutos rojos en los que se escondían ligeros gorjeos, la desnudez púrpura de los olmos, el color vivo y oscuro de los surcos del camino. Los cascos de los caballos producían un repiqueteo musical que acompañaba sus voces jóvenes. Ella se reía de su vestimenta, pues él era todo lo contrario a un hombre presumido, y él disfrutaba con su risa: la frescura de la mañana se entremezclaba con la frescura de su juventud; y cada sonido que pronunciaban, cada mirada que se cruzaban, eran destellos de un manantial desbordante de alegría. Se hallaban en la aurora, tanto dentro de ellos como fuera. Y al pensar en ellos en esos momentos, uno se siente tentado a pronunciar uno de esos lamentos triviales: ¡qué pena que las cosas no hubieran sido un poco diferentes entonces, para que hubieran sido muy diferentes luego! ¡Qué pena que estas dos jóvenes y bellas criaturas no se hubieran prometido allí y entonces, y que nunca se hubieran apartado de ese compromiso en la vida! Pues algo de la bondad en la que Rex creía estaba allí. La bondad es una palabra amplia, a menudo prometedora; como la cosecha, que comprende varias etapas: en la primera, todo yace bajo el suelo, con un futuro impreciso: ¿estará germinando la semilla en la oscuridad? Luego, surgen delicados tallos verdes, y poco a poco los temblorosos frutos pueden ser barridos por una hora de viento fuerte o de lluvia. Cada fase tiene su peligro particular, y tanto cualquier acción particular de la tierra cruel que la envuelve como cualquier otro daño casual externo puede acabar con el sano fruto que lleva dentro.

—A Anna se le había metido en la cabeza que querías ir tras los galgos esta mañana —dijo Rex, que al recordar las palabras de Anna, pronunció las suyas como si tratara de uno de los temas más trascendentales.

—¿De veras? —dijo Gwendolen riendo—. ¡Qué chica más clarividente!

—¿Irás? —dijo Rex, que no había creído que pretendiera ir si lo objetaban los mayores, aunque confiaba en que tuviera un buen motivo.

—No sé. No puedo decirte lo que haré hasta que llegue allí. Los clarividentes se equivocan a menudo: prevén lo que es probable. A mí no me gusta lo que es probable; es siempre aburrido. Yo hago lo que es improbable.

—Ah, me estás revelando un secreto. Cuando sepa lo que es probable que haga la gente en general, sabré que tú quieres hacer lo contrario. Así que ya no harás lo improbable. Yo sabré calcular lo que vas a hacer. No podrás sorprenderme.

—Sí que podré. Volveré a cambiar de opinión y haré lo que es probable para la gente en general —dijo Gwendolen, con una risa melodiosa.

—No puedes escapar de la probabilidad. Y la contradicción es la más grande de las probabilidades. Tienes que abandonarte a un plan.

—Pues no lo haré. Mi plan es hacer lo que me agrade. (Si hasta aquí alguna joven señorita se siente tentada a imitar a Gwendolen, que considere la posición de su cabeza y de su cuello: si el ángulo hubiera sido diferente, el mentón más protuberante y la vértebra cervical un poquito más curvada, diez contra uno que las palabras de Gwendolen habrían caído como una jarra de agua fría al apacible Rex. Pero todos sus extravagantes comentarios eran jocosos y estaban llenos de humor, y a él solo le preocupaba llevar la conversación hacia un punto en concreto).

—¿Puedes conseguir sentir solo lo que te agrada? —dijo él.

—Por supuesto que no; eso depende de lo que hacen los demás. Pero si el mundo fuera más agradable, solo sentiríamos lo que es agradable. La vida de las chicas es tan estúpida; nunca hacen lo que les gusta.

—Yo pensaba que eso les ocurría a los hombres. Están obligados a hacer cosas duras, a menudo muy aburridas, y muy cansadas también. Y además, si nos enamoramos de verdad de una chica, queremos hacer lo que a ella le gusta, así que, al final, seguís vuestro propio camino.

—No lo creo. Nunca vi a una mujer casada que siguiera su propio camino.

—¿Qué te gustaría hacer? —dijo Rex, sin mostrar malicia alguna, ciertamente desesperado.

—¡Oh, no lo sé! Ir al Polo Norte, o hacer carreras de obstáculos a caballo, o ir a ser una reina en el Este como la señora Hester Stanhope[43] —dijo Gwendolen atolondradamente. Las palabras nacieron de sus labios, pero no habría sabido explicar su origen.

—¿No te importa que no pudieras casarte nunca?

—No, no he dicho eso. Solo que cuando esté casada, no haré lo que hacen el resto de las mujeres.

—Podrías hacer lo que quisieras si te casaras con un hombre que te amara más que cualquier otra cosa del mundo —dijo el pobre Rex, al que se le

escapaba de las manos el tema por el cual había querido ganar su admiración —. Conozco uno que te ama.

—No me hables del señor Middleton, ¡por Dios! —dijo Gwendolen precipitadamente, y enseguida un rápido sonrojo se extendió por su cara y el cuello—; esa es la cantinela de Anna. Ya oigo a los galgos. Sigamos.

Puso el caballo a medio galope, y Rex no tuvo más remedio que seguirla. Aun así se sentía animado. Gwendolen se daba perfecta cuenta de que su primo estaba enamorado de ella; pero no imaginaba que el asunto tuviera importancia, al no haber experimentado nunca en lo más mínimo un amor desdichado. Deseaba que el pequeño romance de la devoción de Rex ocupara todo el tiempo de su estancia en Pennicote y que no tuviera que dar explicaciones que zanjaran el asunto. Además, objetaba con una especie de repulsión física, que la cortejaran directamente. Con todo lo que le encantaba que la adoraran, había en ella cierta obstinación a permanecer en la soltería.

Pero cualquier otro pensamiento se esfumó pronto ante la excitación de la escena en los Tres Graneros. Varios caballeros que formaban parte de la cacería la conocían, e intercambió con ellos agradables saludos de bienvenida. Rex no pudo sonsacarle ninguna palabra más. El color y el movimiento del campo tomaron posesión de Gwendolen con una fuerza que no era debida a una asociación habitual, pues nunca había cabalgado tras los galgos —solo había dicho que le gustaría hacerlo, por lo que se lo habían prohibido—; su madre temía el peligro, y su tío declaró que, por su parte, entendía que era indecente que una mujer practicara ese tipo de ejercicio violento, y que por mucho que se hiciera en otras partes del país, ninguna dama de buena posición debía seguir a los galgos de Wessex: a excepción de la señora Gadsby, la mujer del asistente del capitán, que había sido fregona y todavía hablaba como tal. Este último argumento tuvo cierto efecto sobre Gwendolen, y la mantuvo vacilante entre su deseo de manifestar su libertad y el horror de que la asociaran con la señora Gadsby.

Algunas de las mujeres más respetables del vecindario iban en ocasiones a ver sacar a los galgos; pero ninguna de ellas estaba presente esta mañana para refrenarla en su deseo de seguir la cacería, y a la señora Gadsby, con sus dudosos antecedentes, no solo de gramática, tampoco se la veía, con lo que no parecía tan indecente estar allí. Así que Gwendolen pudo disfrutar del estímulo animal que provenía del jadeo de los galgos, el trote de los caballos, las variadas voces humanas, los vaivenes de vivos colores sobre el fondo lejano verde y tranquilo: la mayor excitación de la caza que consiste en

sentirse una especie de combinación de perro y caballo, con la sensación añadida de la vanidad social y la conciencia del poder del centauro que pertenece a la humanidad.

Rex habría podido disfrutar lo mismo si hubiera podido estar más cerca de Gwendolen y no verla constantemente ocupada con conocidos, o siendo observada por lo que acabarían siendo conocidos, todos ellos en caballos impresionantes, que se movían barriendo el espacio circundante tan efectivamente como una palanca giratoria.

—Me alegra verla aquí en esta espléndida mañana, señorita Harleth —dijo Lord Brackenshaw, un noble de mediana edad y procedencia aristocrática, vestido con traje rosa y de aspecto despreocupado, que no habría dado importancia ni al Diluvio universal—. Tendremos una corrida de primera. Una pena que no venga con nosotros. ¿Ha probado alguna vez su pequeño caballo saltando una zanja? ¿No tendría miedo, verdad?

—En absoluto —dijo Gwendolen. Y era cierto. Nunca sentía miedo ante la acción o en compañía—. A menudo le he llevado a saltar barreras y zanjas, cerca de…

—¡Ah, por Júpiter! —dijo su señoría tranquilamente, dando a entender que sucedía algo que obligaba a interrumpir el diálogo, y mientras arreaba el caballo, Rex acercó el suyo al lado de Gwendolen, y en esto… los galgos comenzaron a ladrar y todo el campo se puso en movimiento como si el giro de la tierra los arrastrara; Gwendolen se unió al resto; no hizo ni caso a Rex, que sin pensarlo un segundo también los siguió. ¿Podía dejar que Gwendolen fuera sola? En otras circunstancias habría disfrutado de la cacería, pero se hallaba ahora perturbado por haber reprimido el ímpetu de expresar su amor, y obtener una respuesta a cambio, un ímpetu que no podía transformar ahora en otro tipo de caza totalmente diferente, al menos con la consciencia de estar sobre el viejo caballo de su padre, que aunque era lo suficientemente bueno, tenía ya bastantes años y unos hábitos más bien eclesiásticos. Gwendolen, sobre su pequeño pero animado caballo color castaño, estaba al lado de los mejores, y se sentía tan segura como una diosa inmortal, y de haber pensado en el riesgo, habría sentido una confianza absoluta de que nada malo iba a sucederle. Pero no pensó en tal cosa, ni por supuesto en que hubiera riesgos tampoco para su primo. Si hubiera pensado en él, lo habría hecho con una imagen divertida de que iba retrasándose poco a poco y mirando en busca de verjas: un joven bastante maleable, cuyo corazón debía jadear con el espíritu de un sabueso, atrancado como si estuviera bajo el efecto del hechizo de un

mago sobre un rígido caballo clerical, y que le habría hecho reír con tanta gracia que ni se habría dado cuenta de su mortificación. Pero Gwendolen solía pensar más bien en quienes la veían que en quienes no podía ver; y Rex quedó pronto tan rezagado que no lo habría visto si hubiera mirado atrás. Pues me aflige decir que buscando una verja a lo largo de una vereda acondicionada recientemente, Primrose cayó, se rompió las rodillas, y lanzó inintencionadamente a Rex sobre su cabeza.

Afortunadamente, el hijo de un herrero que también seguía a los galgos con cierta desventaja, a saber, a pie (una forma más suelta de cazar que había sido incluso considerada por algunas mentes frívolas como inmoral), estaba naturalmente también atrás de todo, y resultó estar a la vista del infortunio de Rex. Corrió a prestar la ayuda que tanto necesitaba Rex, pues estaba completamente aturdido, y cuando recobró el sentido lo hizo en forma de dolor. En esta ocasión Joel Dagge apareció como el más útil de los personajes, con un conocimiento adaptado a la ocasión: no solo sabía perfectamente bien qué le sucedía al caballo, a qué distancia estaban de la taberna más cercana y de la Rectoría Pennicote, sino que además pudo asegurar a Rex que se le había dislocado solo un poco el hombro y le ofreció su experiencia con ayuda médica.

—Lord, señor, permítame encajarlo de nuevo. He visto a Nash el encajador de huesos hacerlo, y lo hecho yo mismo a nuestra pequeña Rally dos veces. Al fin y al cabo es lo mismo, un hombro. Si confía en mí y deja la mente en blanco, lo haré sin que se dé cuenta.

—Pues venga, amigo —dijo Rex, que podía fijar mejor su mente que su silla en el caballo. Y Joel consiguió encajarle el hombro, aunque a costa de un considerable dolor para el paciente, que se volvió tan pálido mientras fijaba su mente en blanco, que Joel remarcó—: Ah, señor, *usté* no está *acostumbrao*, por eso es. Yo he visto muchísimas *dislocasiones*. He visto cómo le colocaban de nuevo el ojo a un hombre, fue algo extraño como *to* lo que veo. No te puedes divertir si no ves este tipo de cosas. Pero entró de nuevo. Yo mismo me he *tragao* tres dientes, tan cierto como que vivo. Y ahora, *señorete* —esto lo dirigió a Primrose— ven conmigo, tú no tienes por qué fingir.

Siendo Joel claramente un personaje sencillo, afortunadamente no es necesario decir más de él al refinado lector que ayudó a Rex a volver a casa con tan poca demora como fue posible. No había más alternativa que volver a casa, aunque él estuviera ansioso todo el tiempo sobre Gwendolen, y más apenado pensando en que también ella podía haber tenido un accidente que en

el dolor de sus propias contusiones y en el disgusto que iba a causar a su padre. Se confortó al pensar que todo el mundo se preocuparía de cuidar de ella, y que alguno de sus conocidos la llevaría seguramente de vuelta a casa.

El señor Gascoigne ya estaba en casa, y se hallaba escribiendo cartas en su estudio, cuando fue interrumpido al ver entrar al pobre Rex con una cara que no por estar pálida y un poco desconsolada dejaba de ser agradable y encantadora. Era secretamente su hijo favorito, y un joven retrato del padre, quien, sin embargo, nunca le trató con parcialidad alguna… sino más bien, con un rigor superior. Como el señor Gascoigne había preguntado a Anna, sabía que Rex había ido con Gwendolen al encuentro de los Tres Graneros.

—¿Qué ocurre? —dijo, apresuradamente, sin dejar su pluma.

—Lo siento mucho, señor; Primrose se ha caído y se ha roto las rodillas.

—¿Dónde has estado con él? —dijo el señor Gascoigne, en un tono severo. Raras veces se dejaba llevar por su temperamento.

—En los Tres Graneros para ver salir a los galgos.

—¿Y fuiste tan tonto como para seguirlos?

—Sí, señor. No fui a la zona de vallas, pero el caballo metió su pata en un agujero.

—¿Y tú te hiciste daño, supongo?

—Se me dislocó el hombro, pero un joven herrero me lo colocó de nuevo. Estoy un poco magullado, eso es todo.

—Bien, siéntate.

—Siento mucho lo del caballo, señor. Sabía que sería una molestia para usted.

—¿Y qué ha sido de Gwendolen? —dijo el señor Gascoigne, bruscamente. Rex, que no imaginaba que su padre hubiera indagado dónde estaban, respondió primero con un sonrojo que era aún más remarcable por la palidez previa de su rostro. Entonces dijo nerviosamente:

—Estoy ansioso por saberlo, me gustaría ir o enviar a alguien a Offendene, pero sabe montar muy bien, y creo que se las arreglará; además debe de haber probablemente muchos alrededor de ella.

—Supongo que fue ella la que te convenció, ¿no? —dijo el señor Gascoigne, dejando su pluma, reclinándose en su silla, y mirando a Rex más minuciosamente.

—Es normal que quisiera ir; no lo pretendía al principio, fue arrastrada por el espíritu del ambiente. Y por supuesto yo fui cuando ella fue.

El señor Gascoigne dejó pasar un breve intervalo de silencio, y luego dijo con cierta ironía:

—Pero ahora, te das cuenta, joven caballero, que ya no dispones de un caballo que te permita jugar a escoltar a tu prima. Debes dejar ya esa diversión. Has lesionado a mi corcel, y eso ya es suficiente calamidad para unas vacaciones. Te ruego que te prepares para partir para Southampton mañana y te unas a Stillfox, hasta que vayas a Oxford con él. Eso le irá bien tanto a tus magulladuras como a tus estudios.

El pobre Rex sintió que se le dilataba el corazón y que este reaccionaba como si no hubiera sido mejor que el de una chica.

—Espero que no insista en que me vaya inmediatamente, señor.

—¿Te sientes demasiado mal?

—No, no es eso, pero… —aquí Rex se mordió los labios y sintió que se le saltaban las lágrimas, para su total decepción; así que se reanimó e intentó decir con más firmeza—: Quiero ir a Offendene, pero no puedo ir esta noche.

—Voy a ir yo mismo. Puedo traerte noticias de Gwendolen, si eso es lo que quieres.

Rex se vino abajo. Pensó que esa decisión resultaría fatal para su felicidad, o incluso aún, para su vida. Estaba habituado a creer en el discernimiento de su padre, y esperaba firmeza.

—Padre, no puedo marcharme sin decirle que la amo ni sabiendo que ella me ama.

El señor Gascoigne estaba interiormente reprochándose no haber sido más precavido, y le sabía ahora muy mal por el chico; pero cualquier consideración estaba subordinada a usar las tácticas más prudentes para el caso. Se decidió rápidamente, y pudo responder con tranquilidad:

—Mi querido hijo, eres demasiado joven para dar pasos tan decisivos y trascendentales. Esto es una fantasía que se te ha metido en la cabeza en una semana o dos de ocio: tienes que ponerte a trabajar en algo y olvidarlo. Todas las razones están en contra. Un enlace a tu edad sería del todo imprudente e injustificable; además, las alianzas entre primos hermanos no son deseables. Mentalízate para una breve decepción. La vida está llena de ellas. Todos las hemos tenido; y esto no es más que un leve comienzo para ti.

—No, en absoluto. No lo podré soportar. No serviré para nada. No me importaría nada, si todo acabara entre nosotros. No podría hacer nada entonces —dijo Rex con ímpetu—. Pero no sirve de nada fingir que te

obedeceré. Si dijera que lo haría, estaría seguro de que rompería mi palabra. Veré a Gwendolen otra vez.

—Bueno, espera a mañana por la mañana, y hablaremos de nuevo del asunto, prométeme eso —dijo el señor Gascoigne, tranquilamente; y Rex no se opuso, no pudo.

El Rector no dijo, ni siquiera a su mujer, que no tenía más motivos para ir a Offendene esa noche que su deseo de cerciorarse de que Gwendolen había regresado a casa a salvo. La encontró más que a salvo: llena de júbilo. El señor Quallon, que había ganado la carrera, le había entregado el trofeo, y lo había llevado delante de ella atado a la sillada de montar; más que eso, Lord Brackenshaw la había conducido a casa y se había mostrado encantado con su animada manera de cabalgar. Todo esto le dijo de inmediato a su tío, para que viera lo bien que había obrado al no seguir su consejo; y el prudente Rector se halló ante una ligera dificultad, pues en ese momento estaba particularmente interesado en que los Brackenshaws conservaran la imagen de seriedad de su sobrina, y su opinión en cuanto a perseguir los galgos tocaba de pleno la esencia de su objeción. Sin embargo, no tuvo que decir nada inmediatamente, pues fue la señora Davilow la que habló tras las breves y triunfantes palabras de Gwendolen:

—Con todo, espero que no lo hagas otra vez, Gwendolen. No tendría un momento de respiro. Su padre murió en un accidente, ya sabe.

Al decir esto la señora Davilow apartó la vista de Gwendolen y la dirigió al señor Gascoigne.

—Mamá, querida —dijo Gwendolen, besándola alegremente, y pasando sobre la cuestión de los temores que la señora Davilow había insinuado—: los hijos no cuidan de sus padres con las piernas rotas.

No se había dicho todavía ni una sola palabra sobre Rex. De hecho, no había habido ansiedad alguna por él en Offendene. Gwendolen había comentado a su madre: «Oh, debe de haberse quedado atrás, y se habrá ido a casa desesperado» —y no podía negarse que esto había sido una suerte, puesto que había permitido que Lord Brackenshaw la llevara a casa. Pero en eso, el señor Gascoigne dijo con cierto énfasis mirando a Gwendolen:

—Bueno, la hazaña ha terminado mejor para ti que para Rex.

—Sí, diría que tuvo que dar un rodeo terrible. No has enseñado a Primrose a saltar las vallas, tío —dijo Gwendolen sin la más mínima señal de alarma en su tono y en su mirada.

—Rex ha sufrido una caída —dijo el señor Gascoigne secamente, dejándose caer en un sillón, apoyando los codos y juntando las palmas y los dedos, mientras cerraba sus labios y miraba a Gwendolen, que señaló:

—¡Oh, pobrecillo! No estará herido, espero —respondió con una correcta mirada de ansiedad, como la que los mortales jubilosos intentan inducir cuando sus pulsos laten todavía con el regocijo del triunfo; y la señora Davilow, al mismo tiempo, exteriorizó un suave—: ¡Santo cielo! ¡Allí!

El señor Gascoigne continuó:

—Se le ha salido el hombro, y tiene algunas magulladuras, creo —aquí hizo otra pequeña pausa para observarla, pero Gwendolen, en vez de mostrar síntomas de palidez y silencio, solamente acentuó los rasgos de compasión de su frente y sus ojos, y dijo de nuevo—: ¡Oh, pobrecillo! No es nada grave, ¿entonces? —Y el señor Gascoigne les informó de su diagnóstico. Pero quiso asegurarse con doble garantía, y continuó todavía con un propósito.

—Le recolocaron el brazo de una forma un poco extraña. Un herrero, no un feligrés mío, estaba en el campo (un bala perdida, me imagino, pero apañado), y le encajó el brazo inmediatamente. Así que, después de todo, creo que los peores parados hemos sido Primrose y yo. Las rodillas del caballo están hechas añicos. Cayó en un hoyo, por lo visto, y lanzó por encima de él a Rex.

Gwendolen permitió que su rostro reflejara contento de nuevo, pues el brazo de Rex había sido encajado; y ahora, las últimas palabras de su tío describiendo el accidente provocaron que pudiera controlar aún menos de lo normal su estado de ánimo exultante; dejó escapar una sonrisa, que finalmente desembocó en un ataque de risa.

—Por favor, perdóname, tío. Ahora que Rex está a salvo, es divertido imaginarse la imagen que harían él y Primrose en el camino, y el herrero corriendo. Sería como una caricatura de «Persiguiendo a los galgos».

Gwendolen valoraba sobre todo su absoluta libertad para reírse en situaciones que otros consideraban demasiado serias. De hecho, su risa encajaba tan bien, que los demás acababan a menudo compartiendo su visión jocosa; e incluso su tío llegó a pensar en esos momentos que no era raro que un chico fuera fascinado por esa joven hechicera —que, sin embargo, era más maliciosa de lo deseable—.

—¿Cómo puedes reírte de unos huesos rotos, niña? —dijo la señora Davilow, todavía bajo el influjo de una gran ansiedad—. Ojalá no te hubiéramos dejado tener el caballo. Ya ves que hicimos mal —añadió,

mirando con un cabeceo serio al señor Gascoigne—, al menos lo hice yo, al animarte a pedirlo.

—Sí, en serio, Gwendolen —dijo el señor Gascoigne, dando a su tono un matiz juicioso como el que da un consejo racional a una persona que se supone es también racional—, te recomiendo seriamente, incluso te pediría, que me complacieras, que no repitas la aventura de hoy. Lord Brackenshaw es muy amable, pero estoy seguro de que él opinaría lo mismo que yo. Que la gente hable de ti como la única señorita que caza, te daría una reputación que estoy seguro que no te gustaría. Por eso, su señoría no elegiría que la señorita Beatrice o la señorita María cazaran en esta parte del país, si fueran lo suficientemente mayores. Cuando te cases será diferente: harás lo que tu marido te permita. Pero si pretendes cazar, tienes que casarte con un hombre que pueda mantener caballos.

—No entiendo por qué debería hacer algo tan horrible como casarme sin tener al menos esa expectativa —dijo Gwendolen enojada. Las palabras de su tío la habían molestado, cosa que no podía evitar reflejar; pero sintió que se estaba comprometiendo, y tras desplazarse sin disimularlo a otra parte de la habitación, se retiró.

—Siempre habla de esa manera sobre el matrimonio —dijo la señora Davilow—; pero será diferente cuando encuentre a la persona adecuada.

—¿Nunca nadie le ha tocado el corazón, que tú sepas? —dijo el señor Gascoigne.

La señora Davilow lo negó silenciosamente con la cabeza.

—De hecho, anoche me dijo: «Mamá, me pregunto cómo es que pueden enamorarse las chicas. Es fácil hacer que se enamoren en los libros. Pero los hombres son demasiado ridículos».

El señor Gascoigne rio un poco, y no hizo más comentarios sobre el asunto. A la mañana siguiente, dijo en el desayuno:

—¿Cómo van tus magulladuras, Rex?

—Oh, todavía no están muy maduras, señor; solo están empezando a cambiar de color.

—¿No te sientes a punto para un viaje a Southampton?

—No del todo —respondió Rex, con el corazón metafóricamente en la boca.

—Bien, puedes esperar a mañana, y despedirte de ellas en Offendene.

La señora Gascoigne, que ahora ya sabía todo el asunto, miró fijamente a su café para no empezar a llorar, como ya estaba haciendo Anna.

El señor Gascoigne sentía que estaba aplicando un remedio muy brusco para el intenso trastorno del pobre Rex, pero creía que, de todas formas, era lo mejor. Permitirle que conociera de los propios labios de Gwendolen que no podía tener esperanzas por su amor sería curativo en más de una manera.

—Solo puedo estar agradecida que a ella no le importe nada él —dijo la señora Gascoigne, cuando se unió a su marido en su estudio—. Hay cosas en Gwendolen con las que no puedo conciliarme. Mi Anna vale lo que ella por dos, con toda su belleza y su talento. Es tan mezquino por su parte que no ayude en las escuelas con Anna, ni siquiera en la escuela de domingo. Lo que tú o yo le aconsejemos no le sirve de nada; y la pobre Fanny baila por completo a su antojo. Pero ya sé que tú tienes una opinión mejor de ella —finalizó la señora Gascoigne con una respetuosa vacilación.

—Oh, querida, no hay mal en la chica. Es solo que tiene un espíritu exaltado, y no serviría atarla demasiado. La cuestión es casarla bien. Tiene demasiadas energías para la vida que lleva con su madre y sus hermanas. Es normal y es lo deseable que se case pronto, no con un hombre pobre, sino con uno que pueda asegurarle una posición cómoda.

Mientras, Rex, con el brazo en cabestro, recorría las dos millas del camino hacia Offendene. Le extrañaba el permiso incondicional de poder ver a Gwendolen, pero realmente, la maniobra de su padre no entraba en sus conjeturas. Y si lo hubiera hecho, habría pensado en primer lugar que era de una horrible sangre fría, y luego habría desechado las conclusiones de su padre.

Cuando llegó a la casa, todo el mundo estaba allí menos Gwendolen. Las cuatro chicas, al oírle hablar en el recibidor, salieron apresuradamente de la biblioteca, que era su sala de escuela, y le rodearon compungidas avasallándole a preguntas. La señora Davilow quería saber exactamente que había pasado, y dónde vivía el herrero, para ofrecerle un regalo; mientras que la señorita Merry, que mantenía un aire sumiso y melancólico en todos los asuntos de familia, dudaba si no era considerar demasiado a un personaje de ese tipo. Rex nunca había encontrado que la familia fuera un problema antes, pero justo ahora quería que no hubiera allí nadie más que Gwendolen, y estaba demasiado ansioso por fingir una actitud bondadosa. Al fin dijo:

—¿Dónde está Gwendolen? —y la señora Davilow mandó a Alice que fuera a ver si su hermana había bajado, y añadió—: Le mandé subir el desayuno está mañana. Necesitaba un largo descanso.

Rex, que no podía esperar, optó por el camino más corto, diciendo casi impacientemente:

—Tía, quiero hablar con Gwendolen, quiero verla a solas.

—Muy bien, querido; ves al escritorio. La enviaré allí —dijo la señora Davilow, que se había dado cuenta que a él le gustaba estar con Gwendolen, como era natural, pero no había pensado en que tuviera relación con las realidades de la vida; le parecía simplemente que era algo que formaba parte de las vacaciones de Navidad, que ya se estaban acabando.

Rex, por su parte, sentía que las realidades de la vida dependían todas de esta entrevista. Tuvo que caminar arriba y abajo del escritorio a la espera durante casi diez minutos —amplio tiempo para todos los tipos posibles de elucubraciones imaginarias—; con todo, por extraño que parezca, estuvo permanentemente ocupado en pensar qué y cuánto podría hacer, cuando Gwendolen le hubiera aceptado, para convencer a su padre de que el enlace era la cosa más prudente del mundo, pues le inspiraba con doble energía para el trabajo. Iba a ser un abogado, ¿y qué razón había para no distinguirse tanto como lo hizo Eldon[44]? Se sentía obligado a encarar la vida a la luz del pensamiento de su padre.

Pero cuando se abrió la puerta y aquella cuya presencia anhelaba entró, le sobrevino de repente y misteriosamente un estado de temblor y desconfianza que nunca había sentido. La señorita Gwendolen, simple como estaba, en su vestido negro de seda, cortado en cuadrado alrededor de ese pilar blanco que era su garganta, con una cinta negra atada al pelo, que caía hacia atrás en cascada suavemente y en abundancia, parecía más una reina que nunca. Quizás se había esfumado ese placer latente o la ilusión que había siempre mostrado al saludar a Rex. ¿Cuánto de esto se debía a su presentimiento por lo que había dicho él el día anterior de que iba a hablar de amor? ¿Cuánto a su deseo de mostrar que lamentaba el accidente? Algo de ambas cosas. Pero la sabiduría de los años ha sugerido que hay un lado de la cama que tiene una influencia maligna si al levantarte sales por él; y este accidente les ocurre a personas encantadoras con cierta frecuencia. Tal vez le había pasado a Gwendolen esta mañana. La precipitación con la que había tenido que arreglarse, el modo en que Bugle usó el cepillo, la calidad de las novelas por entregas baratas, que tal como estaban escritas no la complacían, el aspecto del nuevo día, y las instituciones sociales en general, todo era inadmisible para ella. No es que hubiera perdido la paciencia, sino que el mundo no se adaptaba a los requerimientos de su fino organismo.

Fuera lo que fuera, Rex vio en ella una terrible majestad cuando entró y ella le tendió la mano sin el más leve asomo de sonrisa en sus ojos ni en su boca. La diversión que la había animado la noche anterior se había esfumado por la imagen de su accidente, y todo el asunto le parecía ahora estúpido. Pero dijo con perfecta propiedad:

—Espero que no estés muy herido, Rex; merezco que me reproches por tu accidente.

—En absoluto —dijo Rex, sintiendo que el alma se le esparcía por todo el cuerpo como una enfermedad repentina—. Apenas importa lo que me pasó. Me alegro tanto de que tú disfrutaras: bien vale la pena la caída, solo me sabe mal haberle roto las rodillas al caballo.

Gwendolen se acercó a la chimenea y permaneció mirando al fuego de la forma más inconveniente posible para mantener una conversación, de manera que él solo podía verle un lado de la cara.

—Mi padre quiere que vaya a Southampton durante el resto de las vacaciones —dijo Rex, con su voz de barítono ligeramente temblorosa.

—¡Southampton! Es un lugar estúpido para ir, ¿no? —dijo Gwendolen fríamente.

—Lo será para mí, pues tú no estarás allí.

Silencio.

—¿Te importa que me vaya, Gwendolen?

—Por supuesto. Todo el mundo tiene su importancia en esta desolada región —dijo Gwendolen secamente. La percepción que el pobre Rex quería ponerse tierno la hizo recogerse y endurecerse como una anémona de mar al contacto con un dedo.

—¿Estás enfadada conmigo, Gwendolen? ¿Por qué me tratas de esta manera de repente? —dijo Rex, enrojeciendo, y con más energía en su voz, como si también él fuera capaz de enfadarse.

Gwendolen le miró y sonrió.

—¿Tratarte? ¡Tonterías! Solo estoy un poco cruzada. ¿Por qué has venido tan pronto? Es lógico que encuentres un poco de genio por haberme tenido que vestir a toda prisa.

—Sé tan arisca conmigo como quieras, pero no me trates con indiferencia —le imploró Rex—. Toda la felicidad de mi vida depende de que me quieras, aunque solo sea un poco, más que a cualquier otro.

Intentó cogerle la mano, pero ella la eludió rápidamente y se movió hacia el lado opuesto de la chimenea, de cara a él.

—¡Por favor, no me cortejes! Lo odio. —Ella le miró ferozmente.

Rex palideció y se quedó callado, pero no podía apartar su mirada de ella y el dardo que ella le había lanzado no había sofocado el ímpetu que todavía conservaba. Ni Gwendolen misma podía haber previsto que reaccionaría de esta manera. Todo esto era una nueva y repentina experiencia. El día anterior había sido bastante consciente de que su primo estaba enamorado de ella —no le importaba cuánto, mientras él no dijera nada; y si alguien le hubiera preguntado por qué detestaba los diálogos amorosos, habría dicho riendo—: «Oh, estoy cansada de ellos en los libros». Pero ahora se había iniciado en la vida pasional de forma muy negativa. Se sintió contrariamente adversa a este tipo de amor de ofrecimiento.

Para Rex, con veinte años, la alegría de la vida le parecía más cercana a su fin que a un hombre de cuarenta años. Pero antes de que cesaran de mirarse mutuamente, habló otra vez.

—¿Es esa la última palabra que tienes que decirme, Gwendolen? ¿Siempre será así?

Ella no pudo dejar de notar su desdicha y sintió un poco de lástima por el viejo Rex que no la había ofendido. Con decisión, aunque mostrándose a su vez benevolente, dijo:

—¿Acerca de hablar de amor? Sí. Pero no me desagradas para el resto de cosas.

Hubo solo una pequeña pausa antes de que él dijera un bajo «adiós», y abandonara la habitación. Casi inmediatamente después, ella oyó el portazo que dio a la puerta del recibidor.

La señora Davilow también oyó la marcha apresurada de Rex, y vino enseguida al escritorio, donde encontró a Gwendolen sentada en el sofá bajo, con la cara tapada, y el pelo cayendo sobre su rostro como una prenda más. Sollozaba amargamente.

—Hija mía, hija mía, ¿qué ocurre? —gritó la madre, que nunca había visto a su querida hija abatida de esa forma, y sintió algo de la angustia alarmante que las mujeres sienten ante la vista de un dolor predominante en un hombre fuerte; pues esta niña había sido su gobernanta. Sentándose a su lado y rodeándola con sus brazos, presionó su mejilla contra la cabeza de Gwendolen, e intentó que la levantara. Gwendolen dejó que su cabeza se apoyara en la de su madre, y dijo entre sollozos—: Oh, mamá, ¿qué será de mi vida? ¡No hay nada que valga la pena para vivir!

—¿Por qué, querida? —dijo la señora Davilow. Normalmente su hija la reprochaba a ella por dar muestras involuntarias de desespero.

—Nunca amaré a nadie. No puedo a amar a la gente. La odio.

—Ya llegará el tiempo, querida, ya llegará el tiempo.

Gwendolen sollozaba cada vez más; pero poniendo sus brazos alrededor del cuello de madre en una postura casi dolorosa, dijo destrozada:

—No soporto que nadie esté muy cerca de mí excepto tú.

Entonces la madre comenzó a sollozar también, pues esta chica malcriada nunca había mostrado tanta dependencia de ella; y quedaron así abrazadas mutuamente.

Capítulo 8

¿Qué nombre debe adoptar la Alegría,
cuando la vida es justa?

Mañana.

¿Qué nombre se adapta mejor a la Pena
ante la joven desesperanza?

Mañana.

Los problemas duraron más en la Rectoría. Cuando Rex llegó se tumbó en la cama en un estado de aparente apatía ininterrumpida hasta el día siguiente, durante el cual empezó a mostrar síntomas de estar enfermo. De ir a Southampton no había ni que hablar: en lugar de eso, la principal preocupación de su madre y de Anna fue la de vigilar a este paciente que ni quería mejorar, y de ser el espíritu más brillante y agraciado de la casa se metamorfoseó en una insensible criatura de mirada perdida que respondía a cualquier intención de afecto con el murmuro: «Dejadme solo». Su padre miraba más allá de la crisis, y creía que era la manera más corta de concluir un asunto desafortunado; pero le sabía mal por el inevitable sufrimiento, e iba de vez en cuando a sentarse a su lado en silencio durante unos minutos, y se marchaba poniendo la mano sobre los párpados de Rex diciendo: «Dios te bendiga, hijo mío». Warham y los niños más pequeños atisbaban por el filo de la puerta para presenciar el increíble bajón que había sufrido su enérgico hermano; pero él enseguida les indicaba con los dedos que se largaran. Quien estaba siempre allí vigilando era Anna, a la que su hermano permitía que su mano descansara entre la suya, aunque nunca la recibía con acogimiento. El alma de ella se dividía entre la angustia por Rex y el reproche hacia Gwendolen.

«Tal vez sea maldad por mi parte, pero creo que nunca *podré* volver a quererla», se torturaba interiormente la pobrecilla Anna. E incluso la señora Gascoigne sentía enfado hacia su sobrina, cosa que no pudo evitar expresar (apologéticamente) a su marido.

—Por supuesto sé que es mejor así, y deberíamos estar agradecidos de que ella no esté enamorada del pobre chico; pero, sinceramente, Henry, creo que

está siendo dura; tiene el corazón de una coqueta. No puedo dejar de pensar que debe haberle hecho creer algo, o él no se habría llevado tal decepción. Y Fanny tiene también parte de la culpa; está ciega en lo que respecta a esa chica.

El señor Gascoigne respondió categóricamente:

—Cuanto menos se hable sobre el tema, mejor, Nancy. Yo mismo debería haber estado más alerta. En cuanto al chico, da gracias que no le pase algo peor. Dejemos que la cosa se olvide tan rápido como sea posible; y especialmente, en lo que respecta a Gwendolen, hagamos como que nunca ha sucedido.

La sensación general del Rector es que se habían librado de una buena. Si Gwendolen hubiera estado enamorada de Rex, habría habido un problema mucho más grave, cuya solución se le habría escapado de las manos. Pero aun así, todavía tenía que sortear algunas dificultades.

Una buena mañana, Rex preguntó por su baño, y se arregló como de costumbre. Anna, llena de excitación ante este cambio, no podía hacer nada más que esperar a oír como bajaba, y cuando al fin oyó sus pasos, corrió a los pies de la escalera a encontrarlo. Por primera vez, le ofreció una tenue sonrisa, pero parecía tan melancólica sobre su pálido rostro que ella apenas pudo evitar romper a llorar.

—¡Nannie! —dijo él, amablemente, tomando su mano y llevándola consigo despacio hacia el escritorio. Su madre estaba allí, y cuando se acercó a besarle, él dijo—: ¡Qué incordio que soy!

Luego se sentó y sin moverse miró por la ventana abovedada hacia el jardín y los arbustos cubiertos de escarcha helada, sobre los cuales el sol enviaba débiles rayos ocasionalmente, «algo parecido a la sonrisa triste del rostro de Rex», pensó Anna. Se sentía como si hubiera resucitado en un mundo nuevo, y no sabía qué hacer consigo allí, habiendo dejado atrás sus antiguos intereses. Anna se sentó a su lado, aparentando trabajar, pero en realidad le observaba con miradas anhelantes. Más allá de la cerca del jardín había un camino donde a veces las carretas y los carros se dirigían a los campos de cultivo. La cerca tenía una apertura enrejada, ya que las montañas del fondo, con sus bosques colindantes y sus hileras de fresnos apuntando al cielo formaban un bello paisaje. En ese momento atravesaba el camino un carro lleno de vigas de madera; los caballos forzaban sus grandes músculos, y tras haber arreado su látigo, el cochero corrió ansiosamente para guiar al que iba en cabeza, para evitar que se desviaran. Rex pareció observar con

atención, se levantó y no desvió la mirada hasta que la última viga temblorosa hubo desaparecido, y a continuación se paseó una o dos veces a lo largo de la habitación. La señora Gascoigne ya no estaba allí, y cuando se sentó de nuevo, Anna, viendo en los ojos de su hermano que quería volver a hablar, no pudo resistir la tentación de acercar un pequeño taburete y sentarse enfrente de él, mirándole con una expresión que parecía decir: «Háblame». Y habló.

—Te diré lo que estoy pensando, Nanny. Me iré a Canadá, o algún sitio por el estilo. (Rex no se había parado a pensar en la índole de nuestras posesiones coloniales).

—¡Oh, Rex, no para siempre!

—Sí, para ganarme allí el pan. Me gustaría construir una cabaña, y trabajar duro para mantenerla, y estar rodeado del estado salvaje, y tener una gran calma.

—¿Sin llevarme contigo? —dijo Anna, a quien enseguida le asomaron grandes lágrimas.

—¿Cómo podría?

—Es lo que más me gustaría; los colonos están con sus familias. Preferiría ir allí que quedarme aquí en Inglaterra. Yo podría hacer el fuego, arreglar la ropa, y cocinar; y podría aprender a hacer el pan antes de que fuéramos. Sería maravilloso, como jugar de nuevo al juego de la vida, tal y como hacíamos cuando montábamos nuestra tienda y extendíamos el tapete, con nuestros platos y cubiertos.

—Ni padre ni madre te dejarían ir.

—Sí, yo creo que me dejarían, cuando les explicase todo. Además, les ahorraría dinero; y papá dispondría de más para criar a los niños.

Fueron hablando más sobre lo mismo a ratos, y Rex acabó cediendo y consintiendo que Anna le acompañara cuando fuera a hablar del tema a su padre.

Por supuesto, eso fue cuando el Rector se hallaba solo en su estudio. Su madre aceptaría todo lo que él decidiera; pero si se le mencionaba primero a ella, el asunto la habría disgustado.

—¡Bien, hijos míos! —dijo el señor Gascoigne, alegremente, mientras entraban. Era un consuelo ver recuperado de nuevo a Rex.

—¿Podemos sentarnos contigo un momento, papá? —dijo Anna—. Rex tiene algo que decir.

—Será un placer.

Era un grupo remarcable el que formaban estas tres criaturas, cada una de ellas con un rostro estructuralmente del mismo tipo —la frente recta, la nariz inmediatamente corregida de su intención de volverse aquilina, el corto labio superior, la corta pero bien sujeta mandíbula: incluso compartían la misma complexión y mirada. El padre de pelo grisáceo era a la vez corpulento y de mirada penetrante; tenía una línea perpendicular en la frente que se remarcaba cuando hablaba de algo que le interesaba; y la costumbre de mandar le confería un aire de reservada autoridad. Rex habría parecido una imagen de la juventud del padre, si hubiera sido posible imaginar al señor Gascoigne sin un propósito distintivo y sin el mando, abatido por la pena, y sin saber más que un animal enfermo acerca de las formas de pasar desapercibido; y Anna era una copia diminuta de Rex, con el pelo echado hacia atrás y atado, cambiando de expresión según lo hacía su hermano, como si entre los dos compartieran el alma.

—Sabe por qué he estado contrariado, padre —empezó Rex, y el señor Gascoigne asintió.

—Ya he terminado con la vida en esta parte del mundo. Estoy seguro de que no servirá de nada que vuelva a Oxford. No podría leer nada. Fracasaría y le causaría un gasto para nada. Quiero tener su consentimiento para ir por otro camino, señor.

El señor Gascoigne asintió más lentamente, remarcándose la línea perpendicular de su frente, y el temblor de Anna se incrementó.

—Si me permitiera llevar un pequeño equipaje, me gustaría ir a las colonias y trabajar la tierra allí. —Rex consideró prudencial la vaguedad del término: «las colonias» hacían referencia a más ventajas, y era menos probable que fueran rechazadas por un único motivo que un destino particular.

—¡Oh, y conmigo, papá! —dijo Anna, que no soportaba que la dejaran fuera de la propuesta ni siquiera temporalmente—. Rex querrá que alguien cuide de él, ya sabes, alguien que se ocupe de la casa. Y nunca, ninguno de nosotros, se casará. Y yo no costaría nada, y sería tan feliz. Sé que sería duro dejaros a ti y a mamá; pero están los demás que aún hay que criar, y nosotros dos no seríamos más un problema para vosotros.

Anna se había levantado de su sitio, y había usado la treta femenina de acercarse a su papá mientras hablaba. Él no sonrió, pero la sentó sobre su rodilla y la dejó así, como para mantenerla amablemente al margen de la cuestión mientras hablaba con Rex.

—Admitirás que mi experiencia me otorga cierta capacidad de juzgar por ti, y que puedo orientarte en asuntos prácticos probablemente mejor de lo que puedas orientarte tú mismo.

Rex tuvo que decir:

—Sí, señor.

—Y tal vez admitirás, si bien no deseo presionarte en este punto, que es tu deber considerar mi juicio y mis deseos.

—Hasta la fecha no he me he opuesto a nada, señor. —Rex, en su interior, no sentía que fuera su obligación no ir a las colonias sino a Oxford de nuevo, que era, en definitiva, el punto en cuestión.

—Pero lo harás si te empecinas en proceder de forma precipitada y estúpida, y haces oídos sordos a las consideraciones que mi experiencia de la vida certifican. ¿Piensas, supongo, que has tenido una impresión que ha cambiado todas tus inclinaciones, ha aturdido tu cerebro, te ha hecho incapaz de nada que no sea el trabajo manual, y te ha hecho aborrecer la sociedad? ¿Es eso lo que crees?

—Algo parecido. Nunca estaré a la altura del tipo de trabajo que debo hacer para vivir en esta parte del mundo. No tengo las ganas para ello. Nunca más volveré a ser el mismo. Y sin faltarle al respeto, padre, creo que a un hombre joven se le debería permitir escoger su camino en la vida, si a nadie hace daño. Muchos se quedan en casa, y los que quieren, deben poder ir allí donde hay plazas vacías.

—Pero supón que estoy convencido de buena gana, como realmente lo estoy, que este estado de ánimo tuyo es transitorio, y que si te marcharas como propones te acabarías arrepintiendo, y sentirías que has dejado perder toda la educación que has recibido hasta ahora. ¿No tienes suficiente claridad de espíritu para darte cuenta que deberías dejarte guiar por mí durante un tiempo, y probar lo que te digo? En mi opinión, en lugar de estar de acuerdo contigo en que deberías ser libre para convertirte en un colono y trabajar a pico y pala en mangas de camisa, en mi opinión, no tienes ningún derecho a expatriarte hasta que no te esfuerces en sacarle provecho a la educación que has recibido aquí. Y no digo nada de la pena de tu madre y mía.

—Lo siento mucho, pero ¿qué puedo hacer? No puedo estudiar, eso es cierto —dijo Rex.

—No ahora, quizás. Tendrás que perderte un trimestre. Ya he arreglado cómo pasarás los siguientes dos meses. Pero confieso que me has decepcionado, Rex. Creía que tenías más sentido, y que no te abandonarías a

tales ideas: suponer que porque has caído en un problema muy común, como muchos otros hombres tienen que superar, ya estás liberado de cualquier obligación, como si tu cerebro se hubiera reblandecido y ya no fueras un ser responsable.

¿Qué podía decir Rex? En su interior se hallaba en un estado de rebelión, pero no tenía argumentos para discutir con su padre; y mientras sentía, a pesar de todo lo que se dijera, que le gustaría marchar a «las colonias» al día siguiente, en el fondo era consciente que habría tenido que sentir más apego (si hubiera sido un mejor muchacho lo habría sentido) hacia sus vínculos anteriores. Este es el tipo de fe que vivimos en nuestra melancolía.

Rex se levantó de su sitio, como si diera la reunión por finalizada.

—¿Estás de acuerdo en seguir mi consejo, entonces? —dijo el señor Gascoigne, con ese tono especial en que a uno le da la sensación de estar haciendo algo mal.

Hubo una pequeña pausa antes que Rex contestara:

—Probaré lo que puedo hacer, señor. No puedo prometer nada. —Pero pensaba que probar no serviría de nada.

Su padre retuvo a Anna, sujetándola, a pesar de que ella quería seguir a Rex.

—¡Oh, papá! —dijo, con lágrimas en los ojos cuando la puerta se hubo cerrado—. Es muy duro para él. ¿No parece enfermo?

—Sí, pero pronto estará mejor; todo se pasará. Y ahora, Anna, mantente tranquila como un ratón. No vuelvas a mencionarlo cuando se haya ido.

—No, papá. Pero no me gustaría ser como Gwendolen por nada del mundo: que la gente se enamorara de mí de esta manera. Es horroroso.

Anna no se atrevió a decir que se sentía decepcionada por que no le permitieran ir a las colonias con Rex; pero lo mantuvo en secreto, y a menudo poco después volvía interiormente a dar vueltas sobre el asunto diciéndose a sí misma: «Se me habría terminado el salir, los guantes y el miriñaque, y tener de qué hablar en las comidas, ¡y todas esas cosas!».

Deseo remarcar el tiempo en que transcurre la historia, y conectar el curso de las vidas individuales con el flujo histórico, para todos aquellos que se dedican a pensar estas cosas. Este era el período en que se ensanchaban los miriñaques, lo cual hacía pensar en que debían agrandarse el espacio de las iglesias, las salas de baile y los vehículos. Pero el tipo de Anna Gascoigne solo permitía un tamaño de falda tejido para jóvenes señoritas de catorce años.

Capítulo 9

> Te diré, Berthold, en qué se parecen las esperanzas de los hombres:
> un niño atontado, que vibrando de alegría
> lanza el anzuelo al amplio océano
> con un imán pendido de él para pescar un cesto de juguetes.

OCHOS MESES DESPUÉS DE LA LLEGADA DE LA FAMILIA A OFFENDENE, ES DECIR, A finales del junio siguiente, se extendió un rumor por el vecindario que fue causa de un interés excitante para mucha gente. No tenía relación alguna con los resultados de la guerra de América, pero era tal que afectaba a todas las clases alrededor de Wancester: los recogedores de maíz, los cerveceros, los vendedores de caballos, los montadores, todos convenían en que era una cosa loable, y de la que tenían que alegrarse en teoría, como hacían al demostrar el valor de la aristocracia en un país libre como Inglaterra; el herrero del pueblecito de Diplow presentía que habían llegado buenos tiempos; las mujeres de los trabajadores esperaban que los oficiales conseguirían un empleo para sus niños espabilados de diez o doce años; y los granjeros de los alrededores de Diplow admitían, con una nota de amargura y reserva, que un hombre podía tal vez tener ahora un mercado de intercambio más fácil con un almiar de heno o con un carro cargado de paja. Si tales eran las esperanzas de las personas de baja clase social, puede inferirse fácilmente que los que tenían más suerte tenían mejores razones para la satisfacción, probablemente relacionada con los placeres de la vida más que con los negocios. Podía considerarse que vendrían nuevos matrimonios, sin embargo, en ambos casos; y de la misma manera que cuando se anuncia la visita de su Majestad, el sueño de ser caballero o barón se instala bajo ciertas almohadas municipales, también las noticias en cuestión alimentaron expectativas de matrimonio en varias cabezas imaginativas.

Las noticias eran que Diplow Hall, el hogar de Sir Hugo Mallinger, que durante un par de años había cerrado sus blancas contraventanas a los bellos olmos y hayas, al estanque de nenúfares y a sus campos de hierba, donde corría el venado, estaba siendo preparada para un inquilino, que durante el resto del verano y la temporada de caza iba a habitar de forma lujosa la casa y el establo. Pero no era el mismo Sir Hugo, sino su sobrino, el señor Mallinger

Grandcourt, que era el presunto heredero al título de baronet, al no haber producido el matrimonio de su tío más que niñas. No era esta la única eventualidad con la que la fortuna halagaba al joven Grandcourt, como gustaba que le llamaran; pues mientras la oportunidad del título de baronet le vino por su padre, su madre le había dejado en su sangre el derecho a ser barón, de forma que, si ciertas personas intermedias desdibujadas en la distancia morían, se convertiría en barón y en uno de los pocos nobles de este reino.

Es por el reparto desigual de la naturaleza que solo el pájaro macho tiene el penacho, pero no hemos seguido todavía el consejo de los filósofos impetuosos que nos habrían obligado a copiar a la naturaleza en estos asuntos; y si el señor Grandcourt se convirtiera en un barón o en cualquier otro tipo de noble, su mujer compartiría el título, lo que sumándolo a su riqueza presente era ciertamente una razón por la que esa mujer, no habiendo sido todavía escogida, podía ser considerada por más de una persona con un interés empático como una mujer a la que no le faltaría de nada.

Algunos lectores de esta historia considerarán sin duda increíble que haya gente que fabrique planes matrimoniales por el simple hecho de que un soltero de buena fortuna y posibilidades fuera a vivir en las cercanías, y rechazarán estas suposiciones como inverosímiles: alegarán que ellos no tienen mentalidades tan liberales; y que de hecho, esto no hace referencia a la naturaleza humana, que estas especulaciones suelen ser falsas y que, por tanto, no les entretienen. Pero, observemos que aquí no se narra nada de la naturaleza humana en general: la historia, en la fase presente, concierne solo a un grupo reducido de personas de una parte de Wessex, cuya reputación, por otra parte, era intachable, y que, con cierto orgullo declaro, se relacionaban con personas de rango.

Estaban los Arrowpoint, por ejemplo, en su maravilloso hogar en Quetcham: nadie podía achacar intenciones mezquinas en relación con el matrimonio de su hija a unos padres que podían dejarle al menos medio millón; pero al preocuparse sinceramente por la posición de su Catherine (la cual había rechazado resueltamente a Lord Slogan, un noble irlandés intachable, cuya hacienda solo necesitaba sanearse y contar con un poco más de población), se preguntaban, quizás debido a algo más que un impulso caritativo, si el señor Grandcourt era apuesto, de buena constitución, virtuoso o al menos reformado, y si era conservador-liberal, que no lo fuera

demasiado; y sin querer que nadie muriera, pensaban en su sucesión al título como algo deseable.

Si los Arrowpoint hacían tales cavilaciones, es menos sorprendente que las hiciera también el señor Gascoigne, que por ser un clérigo no estaba menos sujeto a las preocupaciones de un padre y un guardián; y ya hemos visto que tanto él como la señora Gascoigne habían experimentado por entonces la carga de conducir a jóvenes criaturas que apenas podían ser controladas mediante consejos prudentes.

Naturalmente, la gente no comentaba entre sí lo que sentían y pensaban acerca de la venida del joven Grandcourt: abrirse de esta manera no es aconsejable ni prudente en ningún tipo de asunto —ni siquiera en algo tan absurdo como la generación de ácidos o el destino de las estrellas fijas—; pues incluso tu contemporáneo, con una mentalidad semejante hacia los mismos temas, puede que halle tus ideas ingeniosas y se te anticipe a que las apliques, o puede tener otro punto de vista acerca de los ácidos y de las estrellas fijas, y piense, por tanto, que no eres muy despejado. El señor Gascoigne no preguntó al señor Arrowpoint si tenía alguna fuente de información fiable sobre Grandcourt como marido para una chica encantadora; tampoco la señora Arrowpoint reveló a la señora Davilow que si el posible noble fuera a buscar mujer entre el vecindario de Diplow, la única expectativa razonable era que él ofreciera su mano a Catherine, quien, sin embargo, no lo aceptaría a menos que él fuera apto en todos los aspectos para asegurar su felicidad. En efecto, incluso hacia su mujer guardó el Rector silencio sobre la posibilidad de contemplar un resultado matrimonial, debido a la probabilidad de que el señor Grandcourt se encontrara con Gwendolen durante el siguiente Encuentro de Arqueros; también el pensamiento de la señora Gascoigne, más activo, apuntaba en la misma dirección. Había dicho entre muchas interjecciones a su hermana: «¡Sería una gracia del cielo, Fanny, si esa chica se casara bien!», a lo que la señora Davilow, entreviendo cierta crítica a su querida hija entre esas palabras de bienaventuranza, prefirió no dar una respuesta en voz alta, pero se dijo para sí: «No conseguirás que se case para bien tuyo». La dulce madre se volvía más bien agria cuando se identificaba con su hija.

La señora Gascoigne dijo a su marido:

—He oído que el señor Grandcourt tiene dos casas más de su propiedad, pero viene a Diplow a cazar. Es de esperar que sea un buen ejemplo para el vecindario. ¿Has oído qué tipo de joven es, Henry?

El señor Gascoigne no había oído nada; o al menos, si sus compañeros habían chismorreado delante de él, no estaba dispuesto a repetir sus chismes, o a darles importancia alguna. Consideraba que era fútil, incluso si hubiera tenido necesidad, mostrar curiosidad por el pasado de un joven cuyo nacimiento, riqueza, y el tiempo libre que disponía en consecuencia, hacían que muchos de sus hábitos, que bajo otras circunstancias habrían sido inexcusables, fueran tan solo veniales. Cualquier cosa que hubiera hecho Grandcourt, no había arruinado su vida; y es bien sabido que en las apuestas, por ejemplo, tanto en las de los negocios como en las del juego, un hombre que tiene la fuerza de voluntad para abandonar cuando solo ha arruinado a los demás, es un personaje reformado. Esto es solamente una ilustración: el señor Gascoigne no había oído que Grandcourt hubiera sido un jugador; y no podemos más que compartir con él el sentimiento de que a un propietario de tierras con una mezcla de sangre noble en sus venas no hacía falta juzgarlo sospechosamente como lo haríamos con una persona reformada que se ofrece como el nuevo mayordomo o ayudante. La reforma, cuando un hombre puede hacer lo que quiera, no puede ser más que genuina. Además, no había ningún signo que mostrara hasta ahora que el señor Grandcourt hubiera necesitado más reforma que cualquier otro joven de treinta y cinco años; y, de todos modos, la importancia de lo que había sido debía determinarse por lo que era actualmente.

También la señora Davilow, aunque no había respondido a la insinuación de compromiso que había hecho su hermana, no podía ser indiferente en su interior a una situación que podía prometer un futuro brillante para Gwendolen. Un poco de especulación del tipo «podría ser» viene de forma natural, sin necesidad de provocarlo; viene en forma de imágenes cuando se menciona a personas desconocidas; y el nombre del señor Grandcourt se forjó en la mente de la señora Davilow primero como un joven excelente, apuesto y realizado del que ella se sentiría satisfecha como marido para su hija; pero luego vino la siguiente especulación: ¿estaría Gwendolen satisfecha con él? No había forma de saber qué es lo que movería el gusto y las afecciones de esa chica —sería probablemente algo más que la excelencia; y así, la imagen del pretendiente perfecto dio paso a una combinación fluctuante de cualidades destinadas a ganar el corazón de Gwendolen. En la dificultad de llegar a la combinación particular que aseguraría el resultado, la madre incluso se dijo a sí misma: «No importaría que ella no estuviese enamorada, con tal que aceptase a la persona adecuada». Pues si ella se había casado, ¿cómo no iba a

desear que su hija hiciera lo mismo? Pero las desgracias que le habían seguido a ella no le permitían hacer mucho hincapié a Gwendolen sobre la conveniencia de un matrimonio, temiendo una respuesta parecida a la que más tarde daría Madame Roland[45], cuando su amable madre, queriendo convencerla para que aceptara a un pretendiente, dijo: «Tu seras hereuse, ma chère». «Oui, maman, comme toi»[46].

En relación con el problemático señor Grandcourt, lo último que quería la señora Davilow, que al menos tenía el buen gusto de temer, era dejar escapar la más mínima insinuación sobre los castillos que había construido en el aire; pues tal insinuación era suficiente para que Gwendolen se pusiera en contra, y detestara al deseable marido de antemano. Desde esa escena tras la visita de despedida del pobre Rex, la madre intuía una nueva forma de peligro si sacaba a colación el misterio de los sentimientos de la chica, y en querer averiguar si se hallaba bien; solo que ella creía que no se hallaría bien hasta que no se casara.

El debate sobre el vestido que iba a llevar Gwendolen en el Encuentro de Arqueros estaba siendo un tema relevante; y cuando se hubo decidido que por su complexión, como toque de color sobre su cachemira no había nada como el verde pálido —la pluma que se estaba probando en su sombrero ante el espejo acabó de zanjar la cuestión—, la señora Davilow se estremeció cuando Gwendolen, en actitud de atarse el lazo, dijo con una mirada cómica:

—¡Qué lástima me dan todas las demás chicas del Encuentro de Arqueros, todas pensando en el señor Grandcourt! Y no tienen ni la más mínima posibilidad.

La señora Davilow no tenía el estado de ánimo para responder inmediatamente, y Gwenddolen se volvió rápidamente hacia ella diciendo, maliciosamente:

—Ahora ya sabes que no la tienen, mamá. Tú y mis tíos, todos vosotros pretendéis que se enamore de mí.

La señora Davilow quiso picarla con una pequeña estratagema:

—¡Oh, querida! Eso no está tan claro. La señorita Arrowpoint tiene unos encantos que tú no posees.

—Ya lo sé. Pero dejan espacio para la reflexión. Mi flecha le herirá antes de que él se dé cuenta. Se declarará mi esclavo, le enviaré por el mundo a que me traiga el anillo de bodas de una mujer feliz mientras todos los hombres que se interponen a su título se morirán de diferentes enfermedades, volverá como Lord Grandcourt, pero sin el anillo, y caerá a mis pies. Me reiré de él,

se levantará resentido, me reiré aún más, pedirá que le preparen su corcel y cabalgará hacia Quetcham, donde hallará a la señorita Arrowpoint recién casada con un músico necesitado, la señora Arrowpoint estirándose de los pelos y el señor Arrowpoint consolándola. Lord Grandcourt se irá, volverá a Diplow, y como M. Jabot, *change de linge*[47].

¿Hubo alguna vez una chica tan bruja como esta? Si alguien intentara esconderle algo, y mantener un secreto poniendo mirada de inocente, ella, solo viéndole por un rabillo del ojo, ya lo había adivinado. Era probable que solo por intuición supiera más que cualquier otro sobre el señor Grandcourt. Esa idea dibujada en la mente de la señora Davilow sugirió el tipo de cuestión que a menudo viene sin más razón aparente que la facultad de hablar y el no saber qué hacer con ella.

—¿Por qué, qué tipo de hombre te imaginas que es, Gwendolen?

—Déjame ver —dijo la bruja, llevando su dedo índice a los labios frunciendo un poco el ceño, para luego estirar el dedo con decisión—. Bajito, justo por encima de mis hombros e intentando parecer alto doblegando hacia arriba su bigote y manteniendo una barba larga, con un monóculo en su ojo derecho para darse un aire de distinción, con una buena pero dudosa opinión sobre su chaleco, y llena de rodeos sobre el tiempo, de la que intentará convencerme. Mientras, me mirará fijamente, y el monóculo del ojo le hará poner caras horribles, sobre todo cuando sonría de modo zalamero. Yo responderé a su mirada en consecuencia, y él percibirá que no soy indiferente a sus atenciones. Esa noche soñaré que estoy mirando la extraordinaria cara de un insecto engrandecido, y a la mañana siguiente me ofrecerá su mano; la continuación, la de antes.

—Ese es el retrato de alguien a quien ya has visto antes, Gwen. El señor Grandcourt puede ser un joven encantador por lo que sabes.

—¡Oh, sí! —dijo Gwendolen, reconociéndolo, pero dando entender que no le importaba; y sacó su mejor sombrero y lo hizo rodar sobre su mano—. Me pregunto qué tipo de conducta debería tener un hombre encantador. —Luego, con un alegre cambio de cara dijo—: Sé que tendría cazadores y corredores, y una casa en Londres y dos casas en el campo, una con almenas y la otra con un porche. Y estoy segura de que con unos cuantos crímenes podría obtener un título.

La ironía de este discurso era algo dudosa y podía mezclarse con cierto fundamento genuino. La pobre señora Davilow se sintió incómoda, pues ella

hablaba normalmente de forma literal y con intención inocente, y dijo, con la expresión condolida:

—¡No hables de esa forma, niña, por el amor de Dios! Los libros que lees te dan unas ideas… Te digo que cuando tu tía y yo teníamos tu edad no sabíamos nada de la malicia del mundo. Creo que era mejor así.

—¿Por qué no me criaste de esa forma, mamá? —dijo Gwendolen. Pero al percibir inmediatamente en su mirada destrozada y en los sollozos que se avecinaban que había dado una puñalada demasiado profunda, se sacó su sombrero y se arrodilló a los pies de su madre, llorando:

—¡Mamá, mamá! Solo hablaba en broma. No quería decir nada.

—¿Cómo podía haberlo hecho, Gwendolen? —dijo la pobre señora Davilow, incapaz de oír la retracción, sollozando violentamente mientras intentaba hablar—. Tu voluntad era siempre demasiado fuerte para mí; ¡si todo lo demás hubiera sido diferente!

Esta lógica inconexa era lo suficientemente comprensible para la hija.

—Querida mamá, no creo que tengas ninguna culpa… te quiero —dijo Gwendolen, sinceramente compungida—. ¿Cómo puedes evitar lo que soy? Además, soy encantadora. Vamos. —Gwendolen frotó suavemente con su pañuelo las lágrimas de su madre—. En serio, estoy contenta de cómo soy. Me gusto más de lo que me habríais gustado mi tía y tú. ¡Qué terriblemente aburridas debíais haber sido!

Tales blandas zalamerías sirvieron para calmar a la madre, como a menudo había ocurrido anteriormente tras colisiones semejantes. Estos conflictos no solían repetirse por la misma cuestión; pues en la memoria de las dos dejaban una asociación de temor con los temas particulares que los causaban: Gwendolen temía la desagradable sensación de remordimientos hacia su madre, que era la forma más cercana de autocondena y disgusto de sí misma que había conocido; y la tímida conciencia maternal de la señora Davilow temía cualquier comentario que llevara la más mínima insinuación de reproche. Así que, tras esta pequeña escena, las dos coincidieron en excluir al señor Grandcourt de su conversación.

Cuando el señor Gascoigne se refirió a él una o dos veces, la señora Davilow temió que Gwendolen revelara su clarividencia descubriendo lo que probablemente pensaba su tío; pero el miedo no estaba justificado. Gwendolen conocía las diferencias entre las personas con las que se relacionaba de la misma forma que los pájaros conocen el clima y el tiempo; y por la misma razón que ella estaba decidida a evadir el control de su tío,

estaba también decidida a no chocar con él. El buen entendimiento que había entre ellos era además reforzado por su mutuo placer en la arquería: el señor Gascoigne, como uno de los mejores arqueros de Wessex, estaba complacido en hallar habilidades parecidas en su sobrina; y Gwendolen vigilaba no perder la protección de su indulgencia paternal, pues desde el problema con Rex, tanto la señora Gascoigne como Anna habían sido incapaces de ocultar lo que ella consideraba una irrazonable alienación. Hacia Anna, hizo el esfuerzo de comportarse con un afecto arrepentido; pero ninguna de las dos se atrevía a mencionar el nombre de Rex, y Anna, para quien pensar sobre él era parte del aire que respiraba, se sentía incómoda con la animosa prima que había arruinado la felicidad de su hermano. Intentó fielmente reprimir cualquier signo que mostrara el cambio de sus sentimientos; pero ¿quién que está apenado puede hacer ver que está alegre?

Este resentimiento injusto tuvo el efecto de endurecer a Gwendolen, e hizo que su carácter fuera todavía más desafiante. Su tío también podía ofenderse si ella rechazaba a la siguiente persona que se enamorara de ella; y un día en que esta idea rondaba su cabeza dijo:

—Mamá, ya sé por qué las chicas están contentas de casarse: para escapar de la obligación de agradar a todo el mundo menos a sí mismas.

Por suerte, el señor Middleton se fue sin haber hecho ninguna proposición; y a pesar de la admiración por la bella señorita Harleth, que se extendía quizás por treinta millas cuadradas en una parte de Wessex repleta de familias cuyos miembros incluían a varios jóvenes sin compromiso, cada uno de ellos feliz de poderse sentar al lado de la animosa chica con la que era tan fácil entrar en conversación, a pesar de todos estos motivos que hacían pensar que Gwendolen iba a tener otros pretendientes más explícitos que el cura precavido, el hecho es que no fue así.

Se vigilaba no solo que los árboles no taparan las estrellas, sino también que cada hombre que admirara a una chica hermosa no se enamorara de ella, e incluso que cada hombre que se enamorara, no necesariamente se declarara. En ocasiones, el precio del maíz, que se sabe es un potente indicador en esta relación, muestra por qué una joven señorita, perfecta en su persona, talentos y vestido, no tiene el problema de rechazar muchas ofertas; y el orden de la Naturaleza es ciertamente benigno con nosotros al no obligarnos a enamorarnos desesperadamente con la mortal más admirable que hayamos visto jamás. Gwendolen, ya sabemos, estaba lejos de ostentar tal supremacía entre todos los observadores. Además, solo hacía ocho meses escasos que

había llegado a Offendene, y algunas inclinaciones se manifiestan lentamente, como las plantas al buscar el sol.

A la vista del hecho de que ninguno de los jóvenes elegibles del vecindario había hecho todavía ninguna declaración a Gwendolen, ¿por qué iba a pensarse que el señor Grandcourt haría lo que otros habían dejado por hacer?

Tal vez porque se pensaba que él era todavía más elegible; pues una gran parte de lo que aparenta ser un final feliz en el mundo es simplemente el reflejo de un deseo. El señor y la señora Arrowpoint, por ejemplo, al no preocuparse por que la señorita Harleth consiguiera un matrimonio brillante, tenían en mente un desarrollo de los acontecimientos bien diferente.

Capítulo 10

1.er Caballero:

> ¿Qué debería ser la mujer? Señor, consultad el gusto de los hombres casaderos. El surtido de este planeta en acero, algodón, lana o productos químicos, toda la materia transformada por nuestra habilidad manual, está forjada en formas sensibles para postular: el pulso del mercado hace subir y bajar los precios, mediante leyes sublimes. Nuestras hijas deben ser esposas, y para ser esposas deben ser lo que los hombres elijan: el *gusto* de los hombres es la *prueba* de la mujer. ¿Os dais cuenta de la expresión?[48] ¿Será normal, me pregunto? Su sentido está bien provisto y equilibrado con las tés y las eses.

2.º Caballero:

> Al contrario, dadle la vuelta: otorgadnos a nosotros la prueba del gusto. ¿Un buen *menú* es hoy lo que los epicúreos romanos insistieron que un caballero debía comer para aprender la dignidad de comer bien?

El Parque Brackenshaw, donde se celebraba el Encuentro de Arqueros, se elevaba plácidamente por encima del valle del vecindario hacia los terrenos del exterior y las amplias y suaves cuestas cultivadas colgando como un vasto telón hacia el oeste. El castillo, que se erigía en la plataforma más elevada de las colinas circundantes, estaba construido por piedra caliza tallada, lleno de luces y sombras producidas por el polvo oscuro de los líquenes sobre las paredes y el lavado de las lluvias. Una gran masa de hayas y abetos lo protegían al norte, y se extendían por las verdes laderas como gotas que buscaban el agua que brillaba más abajo. El forjado arqueado formaba un recinto mantenido cuidadosamente sobre la meseta en el lado más lejano del parque, protegido hacia el suroeste por altos olmos y una espesa pantalla de acebos, que mantenían el camino de grava y el pequeño trozo de césped recién cortado, donde se hallaban unas dianas preparadas para el tiro y sombreadas con el agradable color de la tarde. El recibidor de la arquería con un pórtico en su entrada lucía como un templo blanco enfrente de la verdura del lado del norte.

¿Y qué podía ser mejor trasfondo que los grupos florales de las damas, que se movían e inclinaban sus cuellos como harían los lirios moviéndose pausadamente si pudieran ponerse en camino? También los sonidos eran muy agradables de oír, incluso cuando la banda militar de Wancester dejó de tocar: risas musicales de todos los registros y una armonía de felices discursos

amigables, ora elevándose con dulce excitación, ora hundiéndose en un agradable murmullo.

Ningún divertimento al aire libre podía estar más libre de esas situaciones ruidosas y atiborradas de gente que estropean la mayoría de las fiestas modernas; ningún Encuentro de Arqueros podía ser más selecto, pues el número de amigos que acompañaban a los miembros estaba restringido por un sistema de asignación de boletos, de forma que se invitara al máximo de gente posible pero dentro de los límites de la conveniencia, para poder celebrar la comida y el baile en el castillo. Dentro del recinto no se admitían espectadores plebeyos, excepto los inquilinos de Lord Brackenshaw y sus familias, y de entre estos, eran principalmente los miembros femeninos los que usaban el privilegio, llevando consigo a sus hijos o a sus hermanos menores. Los hombres que había entre ellos aliviaron la insipidez del entretenimiento mediante apuestas imaginativas a sus arqueros favoritos, en las que la puesta era «lo que se quisiera»; pero las jóvenes señoritas, que tenían un principio de discreción diferente, estaban considerando cuáles de esas damas dulcemente vestidas querrían ser, si tuvieran la posibilidad. Probablemente la forma que estas almas rurales habrían elegido como tabernáculo era alguien distinto de Gwendolen —alguien con mejillas más sonrosadas y de pelo del rubio más de moda—; pero entre los jueces masculinos de las categorías que la rodeaban existía una unanimidad inusual en considerarla la chica más fina entre las presentes.

No es de extrañar que ella disfrutara de su existencia en ese día de julio. La superioridad es dulce para aquellos que la aman, incluso ante circunstancias mediocres: tal vez no sea fabuloso que un esclavo esté orgulloso de ser comprado el primero; y probablemente un ave de corral en venta, aunque ella misma no comprenda ser llamada la mejor de un mal lote, puede tener cierta consciencia de su relativa importancia, y se pavonee consolada. Pero para un deleite completo deben concurrir lo externo y lo interno. Y esa concurrencia le sucedía a Gwendolen.

¿Quién puede negar que los arcos y las flechas se encuentren entre las armas más adaptadas del mundo para el juego de las formas femeninas? Sugieren actitudes llenas de gracias y poder, donde esa fina concentración de energía que se ve en toda puntería, está libre de asociaciones sangrientas. La iniciativa tradicional británica de «matar algo» ya no se hace con un arco y un carcaj; las bandas que defienden su entrada contra una nación invasora luchan bajo otro tipo de sombras que una nube de flechas; y los dardos envenenados

son supervivientes inofensivos tanto en la retórica como en las regiones ampliamente remotas. La arquería no lleva consigo el desagradable olor a azufre; no rompe la espinilla de nadie, no engendra monstruos atléticos; su único peligro es el de fallar, cosa que se puede evitar con buen entrenamiento. Y entre los arqueros de Brackenshaw los premios eran todos del tipo simbólico más noble posible: no bienes para llevarse en paquetes, degradando el honor de la ganancia, sino una flecha de oro y plata, y una estrella de oro y plata, para llevarla durante un tiempo en señal de éxito, y luego ser transferida al siguiente que la ganara. Estos símbolos de preeminencia tenían las virtudes de las coronas de flores sin sus inconvenientes, que habrían producido un efecto melancólico en la sala de baile. En conjunto, el Club de Arqueros de Brackenshaw era una institución de buen gusto, de forma que no necesitaba sostenerse por peripecias ridículas.

Y en ese día, todos los factores habidos y por haber se hallaban a su favor. Hacía un calor agradable, y nada de viento para perturbar cabellos, ropa o el curso de la flecha; la preparación se desarrollaba con juego limpio, y cuando hubo una marcha general para extraer las flechas, el paseo de jóvenes criaturas alegres que hablaban y reían, el gracioso movimiento común hacia un objeto común, era un espectáculo digno de verse. En este desfile, Gwendolen parecía una Calipso[49] entre sus ninfas. Sus actitudes y movimientos hicieron admitir a todo el mundo su extraordinario encanto.

—Esa chica es como un corredor de gran temple —dijo Lord Brackenshaw al joven Clintock, uno de los espectadores invitados.

—¡Excelente! Y tremendamente hermosa —dijo el elegante Grecian, que había estado observándola con atención—. Nunca la vi en mejor estado.

Tal vez nunca había aparecido en mejor estado. Su rostro brillaba con el joven encanto en el que no hay trazos malignos de disgusto; al estar orgullosa de su fortuna, mostró su amabilidad a todo el mundo y estaba satisfecha también con el universo. El hecho de no tener la más alta distinción en rango, no ser una de las herederas, como la señorita Arrowpoint, le daba un triunfo añadido, al eclipsar esas ventajas. Por recomendación personal, no le habría importado cambiar el grupo familiar que la acompañaba por cualquier otro: la apariencia de su mamá habría encajado con el de una amable duquesa; su tío y su tía Gascoigne con Anna conformaban igualmente estampas gratificantes en su camino; y Gwendolen creía tanto en sí misma y de una manera tan feliz que no podía sentir la más mínima envidia, aunque la señorita Arrowpoint fuera una de las mejores arqueras.

Incluso la reaparición del formidable Herr Klesmer, que causó cierta sorpresa en el resto de la compañía, parecía ajustarse a la tendencia de Gwendolen a divertirse. Siendo él mismo inferior a Apolo, ¿qué gran maestro musical podía dar una buena imagen en un Encuentro de Arqueros? Los ojos de Gwendolen mostraron un brillo satírico mientras miraba hacia la comitiva de los Arrowpoint en su primera entrada, cuando parecía que Herr Klesmer y el grupo de gente de condados ingleses contrastaban al máximo dentro del denso vecindario de sus anfitriones —o mecenas, como a la señorita Arrowpoint le habría gustado que los llamaran—, para poder negar la posibilidad de cualquier tipo de protección condescendiente, pues se reconocía universalmente su realeza. El contraste podía haber divertido a una persona más grave que Gwendolen. Nosotros los ingleses, somos gente miscelánea, y ante una situación cualquiera, cincuenta de nosotros presentarán variedades distintas de arquitectura animal o de ornamento facial; pero hay que admitir que nuestra expresión predominante no es la de una raza vivaz e inflamada, preocupada con lo ideal y considerando la realidad como un mero relleno. El punto fuerte del caballero inglés puro es el estilo sencillo de su imagen y su vestir; rechaza que le pongan o le quiten algo a su vestido y también rechaza parecer inspirado.

Imaginad una asamblea donde todos los hombres tenían el sello de un inglés de buena cepa, observando la entrada de Herr Klesmer, con su melena sobresaliendo de forma masiva e inconsistente detrás de su sombrero de copa, y que aparecía vestido como para reírse de él a pesar de sus rasgos pronunciados pero delicados y su potente barbilla bien afeitada. Su alta y esbelta figura se erguía de una forma que, no siendo estrictamente inglesa, era todavía peor por el énfasis que ponía en su intención. Si hubiera estado envuelto en prendas sueltas y con un bonete florentino en la cabeza, habría podido sentarse enfrente de Leonardo da Vinci; pero ¿cómo se presentaba con unos pantalones que no respondían al sentimiento inglés respecto a las rodillas?, ¿y qué decir de la chispa que se reflejaba en su mirada y en los movimientos de su cabeza, mientras miraba alrededor de él con curiosidad, que se volvía en motivo de mofa a causa del sombrero, pensado para llevar el pelo bien cortado y un porte serio, tal como el que tenía, por ejemplo, el señor Arrowpoint, cuyo rostro inexpresivo y su buen modo de vestir podían llevarle a cualquier parte sin hacer el ridículo? Uno ve por qué es a menudo mejor para la grandeza estar muerto, y librarse del aspecto externo.

Muchos de los presentes conocían a Herr Klesmer, o habían oído hablar de él; pero solo le habían visto cuando aparecía bajo las luces de las candelas, como músico, y no tenía aún esa suprema celebridad universal que convierte en grande a un artista a los ojos de la gente ordinaria al saber lo caros que son sus honorarios. Para ellos fue como una revelación verle entrar, presentándose inesperadamente en esa tarde de julio en un círculo exclusivo: a algunos les entraron ganas de reír, otros sintieron cierto disgusto por la falta de juicio mostrada por los Arrowpoint al usar de esta forma su carta de presentación.

—¡Qué mal suelen vestir estos artistas! —dijo el joven Clintock a Gwendolen—. Mire la pinta que tiene, inclinándose con la mano en el pecho hacia la señora Brackenshaw; la pluma de la señora Arrowpoint casi toca su hombro.

—Usted es uno de los profanos —dijo Gwendolen—. Está usted ciego con respecto a la majestad del genio. Herr Klesmer me deja pasmada; me siento desgajada en su presencia; mi coraje me abandona.

—Ah, usted entiende perfectamente todo lo de su música.

—No, ciertamente —dijo Gwendolen, soltando una pequeña risa—; es él quien entiende todo sobre la mía y la considera digna de compasión. —El veredicto de Klesmer sobre su modo de cantar había sido una anécdota graciosa para ella pues a él le había sorprendido su *plástica*[50].

—No se dirige a los oídos del futuro, supongo. Estoy contenta de ello; me gusta.

—Oh, es usted muy amable. ¡Pero de qué manera tan distinguida aparece hoy la señorita Arrowpoint! Le sienta realmente bien ese vestido de color dorado.

—Espléndidamente, ¿no cree?

—Bueno, tal vez demasiado simbólica, como si fuera la figura de la Riqueza en una alegoría.

Este comentario de Gwendolen sonaba un poco malicioso, pero en realidad no era más que una pequeña broma. No quería que la señorita Arrowpoint ni ninguna otra persona se retirara, pues creía tanto en su buena suerte como en su habilidad. Naturalmente fue creyendo cada vez más en las dos a medida que la competición transcurría, pues se prometía conseguir una de las mejores puntuaciones, una superioridad que sorprendió a todo el mundo, tratándose de un nuevo miembro; y para el temperamento de Gwendolen, un acierto precedía a otro. Ya no tenía los pies en el suelo, y creía que podía conseguir todas las cosas posibles. Esa hora fue suficiente para ella,

y ya no se sentía obligada a pensar qué debía hacer a continuación para mantener su vida en el tono correcto.

—¿Cómo van las puntuaciones, me pregunto? —dijo la señora Brackenshaw, un gracioso personaje que, adornada con dos niñas preciosas y un niño corpulento, estaba sentada como una señora capital. Su marido se había acercado a ella en uno de los intervalos de los disparos—. Me parece que la señorita Harleth ganará probablemente la flecha de oro.

—Gad, yo creo que lo hará, si sigue así. Se lo está poniendo difícil a Juliet Fenn. Es maravilloso para alguien en su primer año. Catherine no ha conseguido llegar a su registro habitual —continuó su señoría, volviéndose hacia la madre de la heredera que estaba sentada cerca—. Pero consiguió la flecha de oro la última vez. E influye el factor suerte incluso en estos juegos de habilidad. Así es mejor. De esta forma los que están por detrás también tienen una oportunidad.

—Catherine se alegrará de que ganen otros —dijo la señora Arrowpoint —, es tan magnánima. Fue gracias a su consideración que decidimos invitar a Herr Klesmer en lugar de al canónigo Stopley, que había expresado su deseo de venir. Estoy segura que ella habría preferido invitar al canónigo, pero siempre está pensando en los demás. Yo le dije que no era del todo correcto traer a alguien tan fuera de nuestro ambiente; pero ella dijo: «La genialidad en sí no es correcta, viene al mundo para formar nuevas reglas». Y hay que admitir que es cierto.

—¡Ay!, del todo cierto —dijo Lord Brackenshaw, en un tono despreocupado, y añadió rápidamente—: Por mi parte, yo no soy magnánimo; a mí me gustaría ganar. Pero ¡demonios! Ya no tengo posibilidades. Me estoy haciendo viejo y perezoso. Los jóvenes me superan. Como dice el viejo Nestor[51]: los dioses no nos lo dan todo al mismo tiempo; fui una vez un tipo joven, y ahora soy uno viejo y sabio. Viejo, en cualquier caso, que es un don que le llega a todo el mundo si se vive lo suficiente, de forma que es algo que no levanta envidias. —El conde sonrió desahogadamente a su mujer.

—¡Oh, milord!, la gente que han sido vecinos durante veinte años no deben hablar a los otros de la edad —dijo la señora Arrowpoint—. Los años, como dicen los toscanos, están hechos para el arrendamiento de las casas. ¿Pero dónde está nuestro nuevo vecino? Pensaba que el señor Grandcourt iba a estar hoy aquí.

—Ah, pues sí, iba a venir. El tiempo también va avanzando —dijo su señoría, mirando a su reloj—. Llegó a Diplow el otro día. Nos vino a visitar el

jueves y dijo que había estado un poco molesto. Puede que haya sido conducido a otra dirección. ¡Cómo, Gascoigne! —El Rector estaba entonces pasando por ahí a poca distancia con Gwendolen cogida del brazo, y se volvió al oír la llamada—. Esto es demasiado; no solo nos ganas, sino que además traes a tu sobrina para que venza a todas las arqueras.

—Es escandaloso que lo haga incluso mejor que los miembros más antiguos —dijo el señor Gascoigne, lleno de satisfacción y curvando su corto labio superior—. Pero no es lo que pretendía, milord. Solo quería que hiciera un buen papel, sin sobrepasar a nadie.

—Tampoco es culpa mía —dijo Gwendolen, sonriendo astutamente—. Si afino la puntería, no puedo evitar acertar.

—¡Ay, ay!, eso puede ser un mal negocio para algunos —dijo Lord Brackenshaw, de buen humor; luego, sacando su reloj, dijo mirando de nuevo a la señora Arrowpoint—: el tiempo va pasando, como usted dice. Pero Grandcourt siempre llega tarde. Ya me di cuenta en el pueblo que siempre llega tarde, y no es un arquero, no entiende nada de ello. Pero le dije que debía venir, que vería la flor del vecindario aquí. Preguntó sobre usted, vio la carta de los Arrowpoint. Creo que ustedes no le han conocido en el pueblo. Ha estado mucho tiempo fuera. La gente no le conoce mucho.

—No, no nos conocemos —dijo la señora Arrowpoint—. Pero no es lo que habría cabido esperar. Pues su tío Sir Hugo Mallinger y yo somos grandes amigos cuando nos encontramos.

—No sé; no es probable que los tíos y los sobrinos se vean juntos tan a menudo como los tíos y las sobrinas —dijo su señoría, sonriendo hacia el Rector—. Pero, ven conmigo un momento, Gascoigne. Quiero hablar un poco sobre los aciertos de los disparos.

Gwendolen decidió ir también y esperar en el mismo grupo que su mamá y su tía hasta que tuviera que disparar de nuevo. Que, después de todo, el señor Grandcourt pudiera no aparecer en el terreno de tiro había empezado a aparecer en el pensamiento de Gwendolen como algo que reduciría su completa satisfacción actual. Bajo toda su sátira insolente, provocada principalmente porque había adivinado que sus amigos pensaban que sería una buena pareja para ella, sentía algo muy distinto de la indiferencia respecto a la impresión que podía causarle. Ciertamente, él no iba a tener el menor poder sobre ella (pues Gwendolen no consideraba que el deseo de conquistar fuera en sí mismo una forma de sometimiento); había decidido que él sería uno de esos admiradores que asiduamente la llenaría de cumplidos; incluso su

poca experiencia le había mostrado ya a varios de ellos, con barbas de varios colores y diversos estilos de comportamiento; y la sensación de que sus amigos querían que ella lo encontrara encantador, originó en ella una disposición a imaginarlo ridículo. Pero esa no era razón para querer evitar su presencia; e incluso el prever un aprieto pasajero en el caso de que ella tuviera que despreciarlo y rechazarlo, no disipaba la sombra del deseo de que le ahorrara ese aprieto no mostrando ninguna disposición para declararse. Que el señor Grandcourt no se fijara apenas en ella, y se prometiera enseguida con la señorita Arrowpoint no era una imagen que halagara su imaginación.

Así es que Gwendolen había sido todo oídos cuando Lord Brackenshaw contó los motivos por los que no había aparecido el señor Grandcourt; y cuando llegó, nadie prestó más atención —ni siquiera la señora Arrowpoint o el señor Gascoigne— que ella, a pesar de que evitaba expresamente mirar hacia cualquier punto donde fuera probable que él estuviera. No iba a dejar de pensar lo mismo acerca del señor Mallinger Grandcourt, del que tanto se había hablado, tanto si se presentara ante ella como si no. Volvió a concentrarse en el tiro, y se abstuvo tan resueltamente a mirar a su alrededor, que incluso suponiendo que él hubiera tomado un asiento relevante entre los espectadores, estuviera claro que ella no era consciente de su presencia. Y al mismo tiempo, la certeza de que él estaba allí hizo que se sintiera amenazada. Tal vez por eso su tiro fue mejor: en cualquier caso, ganó en precisión, y al final arrancó un maravilloso torrente de aplausos al dar tres veces en el oro —una hazaña que entre los arqueros de Brackenshaw no tenía la vulgar recompensa de un pago en metálico, sino el llevar al cuello la estrella especial de oro—. Ese instante no fue feliz solo para ella: era precisamente el que su mamá y su tío habrían escogido para ella. La muchedumbre se apartó para hacer espacio y dejar que ella pudiera avanzar de forma eminente para recoger la estrella de oro de las manos de la señora Brackenshaw; y el movimiento perfecto de su fina figura verdaderamente era algo agradable de ver a la clara luz de la tarde cuando las sombras eran largas y tranquilas. Ella era el objeto central de ese bello cuadro, y cada uno de los presentes tenía que observarla. Eso era suficiente: ella misma estaba decidida a no ver a nadie en particular, ni volver los ojos hacia nadie que no fuera la señora Brackenshaw, pero sus pensamientos se volvían irremediablemente hacia otra parte. Parte de su alegría se debía a que Herr Klesmer tenía que estar observándola ahora que no era la música el tema principal, y su superioridad quedaba muy distante en ese terreno; pues la vanidad es tan triste ante la indiferencia como lo es la

ternura ante un amor no correspondido. La sombra del poder maligno del indómito Klesmer se interpuso en medio de la agradable sensación de que el señor Grandcourt la estaba viendo en su mejor momento, y la estaba probablemente admirando de la forma más pura. Ella no esperaba admirarle a él, pero eso no era necesario para su paz de espíritu.

Gwendolen se topó con la graciosa sonrisa de la señora Brackenshaw sin enrojecer (la cual se acercó a ella por sorpresa), sino mostrando una encantadora expresión llena de gozo, y se inclinó graciosamente para recibir la estrella alrededor de los hombros. Esa pequeña ceremonia había sido lo suficientemente larga para intercambiar comentarios jocosos y recibir felicitaciones mientras se movía entre los grupos, que a su vez se interesaban ahora en los resultados de la clasificación. Pero sucedió que mientras estaba de pie examinando la punta de una flecha con aire distraído, se le acercó Lord Brackenshaw y le dijo:

—Señorita Harleth, aquí hay un caballero que no desea demorar más tiempo en conocerla. Ha pedido a la señora Davilow que yo mismo fuera con él. ¿Me permite que le presente al señor Mallinger Grandcourt?

LIBRO II

Corrientes que se encuentran

Capítulo 11

> El comienzo de un conocimiento, ya sea con personas o con cosas, sirve para marcar un esbozo determinado de nuestro desconocimiento.

El deseo del señor Grandcourt de ser presentado no pilló de improviso a Gwendolen; pero cuando Lord Brackenshaw se apartó un poco para que se adelantara el presagiado desconocido y se halló cara a cara ante el hombre real, le causó cierto impacto que le hizo enrojecer, tanto más en cuanto se dio cuenta de ello. El impacto vino por la completa alteración de sus expectativas: Grandcourt apenas podía haber sido más diferente de como lo había imaginado. Era ligeramente más alto que ella, y sus ojos parecían sinceros; no mostraba la más mínima sonrisa mientras la miró, ni ningún rasgo de altanería o ansiedad en su porte; cuando levantó su sombrero mostró una completa calvicie rodeada de una simple franja de pelo rubio rojizo, pero también mostró una mano perfecta; la línea que marcaba el rasgo de las cejas a la barbilla, que no tenía una barba que la cubriera, era decididamente atractiva, con tan solo moderadas desviaciones de la perpendicular, y el sencillo bigote era también perpendicular. No era posible que un aspecto humano estuviera más libre de mueca o contorsión alguna; tal vez tampoco era posible que un hombre vivo completamente despierto estuviera menos animado. El perfecto caballero inglés, que tras el saludo de inclinación vuelve a su posición rígida, asiente severamente, y parece estar en un estado de aspereza interna, sugiere la supresión de toda vivacidad, y puede pensarse de él que se liberará en forma algo violenta cuando se vea libre de las formas; pero el porte de Grandcourt no tenía rigidez, sino más bien flaccidez. Su complexión tenía una belleza descolorida, asemejándose a la de las actrices cuando están desprovistas de los colores artificiales; sus largos y estrechos ojos grises no expresaban más que indiferencia. Intentar una descripción es estúpido: ¿quién puede describir de golpe a un ser humano? Incluso cuando nos es presentado solo empezamos a conocer su apariencia que debe luego ser completada por innumerables impresiones bajo circunstancias diferentes. Reconocemos el alfabeto; no estamos seguros del lenguaje. Estoy tan solo mencionando los puntos que Gwendolen vio a través de la luz de un contraste prevenido en los primeros minutos de su encuentro con Grandcourt; se resumían en las

palabras: «Él no es ridículo». Pero inmediatamente se marchó Lord Brackenshaw, y comenzó lo que llamamos la conversación, de la cual el elemento primero y constante fue que Grandcourt observó a Gwendolen de una forma ligeramente exploradora, pero sin cambiar de expresión, mientras ella solo le miraba de forma ocasional con destellos de observación envueltos un poco en coquetería. Además, tras las respuestas de ella, se formaba una pausa más o menos larga antes de que él volviera a hablar.

—Creía que la arquería era muy aburrida —empezó Grandcourt. Hablaba con fino acento, pero con una pronunciación lenta y algo entrecortada, como la de un personaje distinguido con un resfriado de pecho distinguido.

—¿Se ha convertido hoy? —dijo Gwendolen.

(Pausa, durante la cual ella imaginó varias formas y modos de causarle una buena impresión).

—Sí, desde que la vi tirar. En los juegos de esta clase normalmente se ve a la gente fallar y mostrar su torpeza.

—Supongo que usted es un disparador de primera con el rifle.

(Pausa, durante la cual Gwendolen, habiendo observado rápidamente a Grandcourt, se hizo una breve imagen de él como un oyente indefinido).

—He dejado de disparar.

—Oh, entonces es usted una persona formidable. La gente que ha hecho cosas una vez y luego las abandona le hace sentir a una muy desdeñable, como si estuviera usando cosas pasadas de moda. Espero que no haya abandonado todas las locuras, porque yo practico muchas.

(Pausa, durante la cual Gwendolen hizo varias interpretaciones de sus propios comentarios).

—¿A qué llama usted locuras?

—Bueno, en general, creo que cualquier cosa que sea agradable se la llama locura. Pero usted no ha dejado de cazar, he oído.

(Pausa, en la que Gwendolen recordó lo que había oído sobre la posición de Grandcourt, y decidió que era el hombre más aristocrático que había visto nunca).

—Uno tiene que hacer algo.

—¿Y practica ir a caballo? ¿O es de las cosas que también ha dejado?

(Pausa, durante la cual Gwendolen pensó que un hombre extremadamente calmado y de maneras frías podría ser menos desagradable como marido que cualquier otro hombre, y que no interferiría con las preferencias de su mujer).

—Monto un caballo de vez en cuando; pero no me apasiona tanto como algunos hombres. ¿A usted le gustan los caballos?

—Sí, ciertamente: cuando más disfruto de la vida es cuando estoy a lomos de un caballo, yendo al galope. No pienso en nada. Solo me siento fuerte y feliz.

(Pausa, en la que Gwendolen se preguntó si a Grandcourt le habría gustado lo que había dicho, pero se dijo que no iba a disimular sus gustos).

—¿Le gusta el peligro?

—No lo sé. Cuando monto a caballo, nunca pienso en el peligro. Me parece que si me rompiera los huesos no lo notaría. Abordaría cualquier cosa que se interpusiera en mi camino.

(Pausa, durante la cual Gwendolen corrió por toda una temporada de caza motada en dos caballos a su gusto).

—Tal vez le gustaría cazar tigres o jabalíes. Vi a algunos durante una o dos temporadas en el Este. Todo lo de aquí es poca cosa después de aquello.

—¿A usted le gusta el peligro, entonces?

(Pausa, en la que Gwendolen especuló sobre la posibilidad de que los hombres de maneras más frías fueran los más aventureros, y sintió la fuerza de su propia conclusión, suponiendo que hubiera que decidir algo).

—Uno debe tener una cosa u otra. Pero se acaba acostumbrando.

—Empiezo a pensar que soy muy afortunada, porque todo es nuevo para mí: es que no le puedo sacar todo el jugo a las cosas. No estoy acostumbrada a nada excepto a estar aburrida, cosa que me gustaría abandonar como usted ha abandonado los disparos.

(Pausa, durante la cual se le ocurrió a Gwendolen que un hombre de maneras frías y distinguidas sería posiblemente un compañero aburrido; pero por otra parte pensó que la mayoría de las personas eran aburridas, que tampoco contaba con que los maridos fueran compañeros —y que, después de todo, no iba a aceptar a Grandcourt).

—¿Por qué está usted aburrida?

—Este es un vecindario horroroso. No hay nada que se pueda hacer en él. Es por eso por lo que he practicado con el arco.

(Pausa, durante la cual Gwendolen reflexionó que la vida de una mujer soltera que no podía irse por ahí ni tener el control de nada debía ser necesariamente aburrida fuera lo que fuera con lo que se comparase mientras fuera pasando el tiempo).

—Se ha hecho usted la reina. Imagino que se llevará el primer premio.

—No lo sé. Tengo grandes rivales. ¿No observó usted lo bien que dispara la señorita Arrowpoint?

(Pausa, en la que Gwendolen pensó que los hombres sabían escoger a alguien distinto de la mujer que más admiraban, y recordó varias experiencias de ese tipo en las novelas).

—¿La señorita Arrowpoint? No, o sea, sí.

—¿No deberíamos ir a oír los resultados? Todo el mundo está yendo al otro lado ahora, ¿vamos con ellos? Creo que mi tío me está mirando. Quizás quiere que vaya.

Gwendolen se sintió aliviada de poder cambiar de esta manera las circunstancias: no es que se sintiera incómoda con el cara a cara, pero mientras duraba no pudo aparentemente verse libre del sonrojo no deseado en sus mejillas y la sensación de sorpresa que la hacía sentirse menos dueña de sí misma que lo habitual. Y este señor Grandcourt, que parecía percibir su propia importancia más que la de ella —un tipo de irracionalidad que pocos de nosotros puede tolerar—, no debía dar por supuesto que él era de importancia para ella, o que porque otros especulaban sobre él como un pretendiente deseado, ella misma también se había puesto a sus pies. La forma en que había llenado Grandcourt las pausas será más evidente de aquí en adelante.

—Acabas de perder la flecha de oro, Gwendolen —dijo el señor Gascoigne—. La señorita Juliet Fenn te saca ochos puntos.

—Estoy muy contenta de oír eso. Habría sentido que me estaba haciendo demasiado desagradable, ganándolo todo —dijo Gwendolen, de forma bastante desprendida.

Era imposible tener envidia de Juliet Fenn, una chica mediocre en todo menos en el arco y en su simplicidad, esta última tan remarcable como la de su padre: su mandíbula inferior sobresaliente y con la frente retrocedida recordando la de los peces más inteligentes. (A buen seguro, considerando la importancia que se le da a tal incidente en la descendencia femenina, los hombres casaderos, o lo que los nuevos ingleses llaman «pretendientes destinados», deberían mirarse desapasionadamente en el espejo, pues la selección natural de una pareja más hermosa que ellos ciertamente no oculta el efecto de su propia fealdad).

Por entonces había un movimiento animado entre los grupos entremezclados, que alargó considerablemente la conversación. Todo el mundo hablaba con el resto por turnos, y Gwendolen, que decidió ver qué

sucedía alrededor de ella, observó que a Grandcourt le estaban presentando a Klesmer; concretamente, se lo estaba presentando una persona desconocida para ella, un hombre de mediana edad, de rostro oscuro y manos gordas, que parecía encontrarse a gusto con ambos, y que los condujo a los Arrowpoint, que ya habían saludado tanto él como Grandcourt. A ella no le importaba mucho saber quién era este estraño; pero deseaba conocer cuáles eran las formas de Grandcourt hacia alguien que no fuera ella. Precisamente las mismas, salvo que no miraba mucho a la señorita Arrowpoint, sino más bien a Klesmer, que hablaba animadamente, ora estirando sus largos dedos horizontalmente, ora señalando al suelo con su dedo índice, ora cruzando los brazos y sacudiendo su melena, mientras se dirigía primero al uno y luego al otro, incluido Grandcourt, que escuchaba con rostro impasible y ojos avispados, con su dedo índice izquierdo en el bolsillo de su chaleco, y el derecho acariciando su fino bigote.

«Me pregunto cuál es el estilo que más admira la señorita Arrowpoint», era un pensamiento que cruzó por la mente de Gwendolen mientras sus ojos y sus labios concurrían en una expresión burlesca. Pero no se recreó en su diversión mirando como una curiosa, y regaló su simpatía a todos los que la rodeaban, decidida a no prestar atención a si el señor Grandcourt se le acercaba de nuevo o no.

Vino otra vez, sin embargo, y en un momento en que pudo proponer conducir a la señora Davilow a su carruaje.

—¿Podemos vernos de nuevo en la sala de baile? —dijo ella, cuando él levantó su sombrero al salir. El «sí» de su respuesta fue pronunciado, como siempre, lentamente y con entera gravedad.

—Te equivocaste por una vez, Gwendolen —dijo la señora Davilow durante el corto trayecto al castillo.

—¿En qué, mamá?

—Sobre el aspecto y las maneras del señor Grandcourt. No puedes encontrar nada ridículo en él.

—Supongo que lo encontraría si lo intentara, pero no quiero hacerlo —dijo Gwendolen, con cierta mezquindad; y su mamá tuvo miedo de añadir nada más.

Era la norma en tales ocasiones que las damas y los caballeros comieran aparte, para que la comida fuera un tiempo de tranquilidad y descanso para ambos grupos. De hecho, los caballeros disfrutaban contándose un conjunto de historias propias de la temporada de arquería sobre el refinamiento de las

damas, y se decía de ellas que mostraban un indignante entendimiento, propio de hombres, sobre la carne de venado, que incluso pedían las partes más gordas —una prueba de la espeluznante proporción en que avanzaba la corrupción entre las mujeres, que solo las frenaban las severas normas sociales—. Y cada año, el amable Lord Brackenshaw, que tenía algo de *gourmet*, recitaba la opinión de Byron de que una mujer nunca debía ser vista comiendo, introduciéndolo con un confidencial «El hecho es», como si estuviera admitiendo por primera vez su concordancia con el sentimiento del refinado poeta.

En el salón comedor de las mujeres era evidente que Gwendolen no era de las favoritas entre las de su sexo; no pudo ni empezar a intimar con las otras chicas, las cuales, en la conversación, tan solo reparaban en lo que ella decía, pero sin intercambiar impresiones de forma natural. Quizás es que ella no estuviera muy interesada en ellas, y cuando estaba en su compañía le embarga una sensación de soledad, como si estuviera en un banco vacío. La señora Vulcany remarcó una vez que la señorita Harleth era demasiado aficionada a los caballeros; pero sabemos que en absoluto estaba ella interesada en ellos —solo le gustaba su homenaje—, cosa que las mujeres no podían proporcionar. La excepción a esta hosquedad voluntaria era la señorita Arrowpoint, que a menudo se las arreglaba disimuladamente para estar a su lado, y hablaba con ella con sincera amistad.

—Ella sabe, como yo, que nuestras amigas están a punto de pelearse por un marido para nosotras —pensó Gwendolen—, y está decidida a no entrar en la pelea.

—Creo que la señorita Arrowpoint tiene los modales más refinados que he visto nunca —dijo la señora Davilow, cuando ella y Gwendolen estaban en el vestidor con la señora Gascoigne y Anna, pero a una distancia donde podían hablar aparte.

—Ojalá fuera como ella —dijo Gwendolen.

—¿Por qué? ¿Estás descontenta contigo misma, Gwen?

—No, pero estoy descontenta con las cosas. Ella parece satisfecha.

—Creo que hoy deberías sentirte satisfecha. Tienes que haber disfrutado con el tiro. Te vi hacerlo.

—Oh, pero ya ha acabado, y no sé qué vendrá después —dijo Gwendolen, estirándose con una especie de lamento y extendiendo sus brazos. Iban ahora más ligeras de ropa: era la costumbre bailar en el vestidor, sin la chaqueta; y la simplicidad de su blanca cachemira con su borde verde pálido realzaba su

forma al máximo. Una delgada cadena dorada alrededor de su cuello, y la estrella de oro sobre su pecho eran sus únicos ornamentos. Su suave pelo atusado y recogido dentro de una gran corona formaba una línea clara sobre su frente. A Sir Joshua[52] le habría gustado pintar su retrato; y habría tenido una tarea más fácil que la del historiador al menos en esto, pues no habría tenido que representar la realidad del cambio, tan solo darle estabilidad a un momento precioso.

—Ahora vendrá el baile —dijo la señora Davilow—. Seguro que disfrutarás.

—Solo bailaré las cuadrillas[53]. Así se lo dije al señor Clintock. No bailaré ningún vals ni ninguna polca con nadie.

—¿Por qué demonios se te ocurre decir eso de repente?

—No soporto tener tan cerca a personas feas.

—¿A quién te refieres como persona fea?

—Oh, hay muchos.

—El señor Clintock, por ejemplo, no es feo. —La señora Davilow no se atrevía a mencionar a Grandcourt.

—Bueno, detesto que me toque con su chaqueta de lana.

—¡Fancy! —llamó la señora Davilow a su hermana, que venía del otro lado de la sala—. Gwendolen dice que no bailará valses ni polcas.

—Pienso que se deja llevar siempre por sus caprichos —dijo la señora Gascoigne, seriamente—. Sería más adecuado que se comportara como las otras jóvenes señoritas lo hacen en ocasiones tales como esta; especialmente cuando ha tenido la ventaja de recibir clases de baile de primera.

—¿Por qué tengo que bailar un vals si no me gusta, tía? No está en el Catecismo.

—¡Querida! —exclamó la señora Gascoigne en un tono de reprensión severa; Anna parecía asustada por el atrevimiento de Gwendolen. Pero no dijeron nada más.

Aparentemente algo había cambiado el estado de ánimo de Gwendolen desde la hora de exultante alegría en el campo de tiro. Pero ella no parecía peor bajo los candelabros de la sala de baile, donde el dulce esplendor de la escena y los agradables olores del invernáculo no podían más que ablandar el carácter, sobre todo si añadimos el hecho de ser consciente de que ella era particularmente requerida. No había apenas hombre que no quisiera ser su acompañante de baile, y cada uno de los que aceptaba protestaba melancólicamente de que ella no bailara valses ni polcas.

«¿Está usted bajo alguna promesa, señorita Harleth?». «¿Por qué es usted tan cruel con todos nosotros?». «¡Usted bailó un vals conmigo en febrero!». «¡Y usted que baila tan bien los valses!». Eran exclamaciones que no dejaban de molestarla. Las damas que bailaban valses, naturalmente pensaban que la señorita Harleth solo quería hacerse la interesante; pero cuando su tío oyó por casualidad su negativa, la apoyó diciendo:

—Gwendolen suele tener buenas razones. —Él pensaba que de verdad se mostraba más distinguida no bailando valses, y deseaba que fuese distinguida. Se pretendía que el baile de los arqueros se mantuviera en un tono tranquilo, adecuado tanto para las dignidades clericales como seculares: no era un escape para la inquietud de los jóvenes y él mismo era de la opinión que las danzas modernas eran demasiado alborotadoras.

Entre los hombres detractores del baile, sin embargo, no se hallaba el señor Grandcourt. Tras bailar una cuadrilla con la señorita Arrowpoint, parecía que no pretendía preguntar por ninguna otra compañera. Gwendolen le observó frecuentemente con los Arrowpoint, pero no aprovechó ninguna oportunidad para acercarse a ella. El señor Gascoigne a veces le hablaba; pero el señor Gascoigne estaba en todas partes. Ahora creía que, después de todo, ella no tendría probablemente el menor problema con él: quizás la había mirado sin una admiración especial, y estaba demasiado acostumbrado a todo en el mundo como para pensar en ella como algo más que una de las chicas que invitaban en esa parte del país. ¡Por supuesto! Era ridículo que los mayores se entretuvieran con ideas sobre qué haría un hombre, sin haberle visto siquiera a través de un telescopio. Probablemente él pretendía casarse con la señorita Arrowpoint. Sucediera lo que sucediera, a ella, Gwendolen, no le iba a decepcionar: el asunto era una anécdota, tomara el camino que tomara, pues en ningún momento se había comprometido, ni siquiera con una confidencia silenciosa, con lo que haría el señor Grandcourt. Con todo, se dio cuenta que él a veces cambiaba sigilosa y gradualemente su posición de acuerdo con la de ella, de forma que él pudiera verla siempre que estuviera bailando, y si no la admiraba… peor para él.

Este movimiento para conseguir que ella estuviera a la vista fue haciéndose más descarado de lo normal a medida que avanzaba la noche, cuando Gwendolen había aceptado a Klesmer como compañero; y ese personaje de amplia mirada que lo veía todo y nada por turnos, le dijo mientras caminaban:

—El señor Grandcourt es un hombre de buen gusto. Le gusta verla bailar.

—Tal vez le guste mirar lo que va en contra de su gusto —dijo Gwendolen, soltando una pequeña risa: se sentía valerosa con Klesmer ahora —. Puede estar tan cansado de admirar que prefiere algo que le disguste para variar.

—Esas palabras no son apropiadas en sus labios —dijo Klesmer, rápidamente, frunciendo el ceño como solo él sabía, mientras sacudía su mano como para disipar los sonidos discordantes.

—¿Es usted tan crítico con las palabras como con la música?

—Ciertamente lo soy. Le pediría que sus palabras estuvieran de acuerdo con su cara y sus formas, que su significado produjera siempre una música sublime.

—Eso es tanto un cumplido como una enmienda. Me siento halagada por ambos. Pero ¿sabe que soy lo suficientemente atrevida para desear corregirle a *usted*, y pedirle que entienda una broma?

—Uno puede entender las bromas sin que le gusten —dijo el terrible Klesmer—. He visto libretos de óperas repletos de burlas acerca de mí; era precisamente porque las entendía que no me gustaban. La gente cómica enseguida quiere desafiar a un hombre porque parece serio. «¿No le ve usted la gracia, señor?». «No, señor, pero veo lo que usted quiere decir». Y entonces se me etiqueta como un hombre sin gracia. Pero, de hecho —dijo Klesmer, saltando de su rápida narrativa a un tono más reflexivo, con su ceño imponente—, soy muy sensible al ingenio y al humor.

—Me alegro que me diga eso —dijo Gwendolen, no sin cierta intención maliciosa. Las reflexiones de Klesmer habían ido fluyendo y cambiando a medida que hablaba, como era habitual en él, y ella tenía ahora todo el control —. Dígame, por favor, ¿quién es el que está al lado de la puerta de la sala de cartas? —continuó ella, viendo al mismo desconocido con el que Klesmer había estado hablando animadamente en el campo de tiro—. Es un amigo suyo, creo.

—No, no; un aficionado que he visto en el pueblo: Lush, un tal señor Lush, demasiado aficionado a Meyerbeer y Scribe[54], demasiado aficionado al drama fácil.

—Gracias. Quería saber si usted pensaba si su cara y sus formas requerían que el significado de sus palabras produjera una música sublime. —Klesmer fue vencido, y le dirigió una encantadora sonrisa amistosa hasta que ella le rogó le acompañase al lado de su mamá.

Tres minutos después anuló todas sus intenciones respecto a la indiferencia de Grandcourt. Al volver la cabeza tras algunas observaciones hechas a su madre, descubrió que se había acercado a ella.

—¿Puedo preguntarle si está cansada de bailar, señorita Harleth? —empezó, mirando al suelo con su anterior expresión imperturbable.

—En lo más mínimo.

—¿Me concederá el honor de la siguiente, o de cualquier otra, cuadrilla?

—Debería alegrarme —dijo Gwendolen, mirando su carta—, pero estoy comprometida para el siguiente con el señor Clintock, y además descubro que estoy atada para cada cuadrilla: no dispongo de ninguna libre. —No le sabía mal castigar la tardanza del señor Grandcourt, aunque al mismo tiempo le habría gustado bailar con él. Le ofreció una sonrisa encantadora mientras le miraba para darle su respuesta, y él permaneció de pie sin moverse, mirando hacia el suelo sin sonrisa alguna.

—Soy desafortunado al llegar tan tarde —dijo, tras un momento de pausa.

—Me parecía que no le importaba bailar —dijo Gwendolen—, pensé que debía ser una de las cosas que había abandonado.

—Sí, pero no he podido bailar con usted —dijo Grandcourt. Siempre había la misma pausa antes de que retomara el hilo—. Usted ha hecho del baile algo nuevo, como hizo con el tiro.

—¿Es la novedad siempre agradable?

—No, no, no siempre.

—Entonces no sé si sentirme halagada o no. Cuando hubiera bailado una vez conmigo ya no habría más novedad.

—Al contrario; habría probablemente mucha más.

—Eso es algo profundo. No lo entiendo.

—¿Es difícil hacer que la señorita Harleth entienda su poder? —Grandcourt se había vuelto a la señora Davilow, quien, sonriendo amablemente a su hija, dijo:

—Creo que normalmente no sorprende a la gente que le cuesta entender las cosas.

—Mamá —dijo Gwendolen, en un tono de desaprobación—, soy adorablemente estúpida, y quiero que se me explique todo… cuando el significado es agradable.

—Si usted es estúpida, admito que la estupidez es adorable —replicó Grandcourt, tras la pausa habitual, y sin cambiar de tono. Claramente, sabía qué decir.

—Empiezo a sospechar que mi caballero se ha olvidado de mí —observó Gwendolen poco después—. Veo que la cuadrilla se está formando.

—Se merece que lo abandone —dijo Grandcourt.

—Creo que se le puede excusar —dijo Gwendolen.

—Tiene que haber habido algún malentendido —dijo la señora Davilow —. El señor Clintock estaba muy ilusionado con el emparejamiento para haberlo olvidado.

Pero entonces se acercó la señora Brackenshaw y dijo:

—Señorita Harleth, el señor Clintock me ha encargado expresarle su profundo pesar por tener que marcharse sin tener el placer de bailar de nuevo con usted. Ha llegado una carta urgente de su padre el archidiácono; algo importante: ha tenido que irse. Estaba *au désespoir*[55].

—Oh, ha sido muy amable de recordar el compromiso ante las circunstancias —dijo Gwendolen—. Siento que le hayan reclamado. —Era fácil mostrarse apenadamente cortés ante una ocasión tan oportuna.

—¿Entonces puedo aprovechar la desdicha del señor Clintock? —dijo Grandcourt. ¿Puedo esperar que me permita ocupar su puesto?

—Estaré muy contenta de bailar la cuadrilla siguiente con usted.

La casualidad del suceso parecía un augurio, y mientras Gwendolen permanecía en pie delante de Grandcourt preparada para la cuadrilla, sintió renacer en ella el júbilo —la sensación de que todo estaba ante ella—, que había experimentado el día anterior. Ningún hombre podía haberse conducido por la cuadrilla con más perfección que Grandcourt; y la ausencia de cualquier ardor en su atención hacia ella satisfacía su gusto de su compañera. Se había convencido ahora que él quería halagarla, remarcar su admiración de un modo perceptible; y comenzó a parecer probable que ella tuviera el poder de rechazarle, y suponía un placer considerar las circunstancias que harían que su rechazo fuera espléndido, o bien reconocer el verdadero valor del señor Grandcourt. Era también agradable adivinar que el seleccionarla para bailar exclusivamente a ella de entre todas las damas solteras presentes, atraería las miradas de todos; pero, de todos modos, ella lo disimuló encarecidamente, y al final de la cuadrilla caminó del brazo de Grandcourt como si fuera una de las chicas más ingenuas del mundo, a pesar de ser una de las más avispadas y sutiles. Se encontraron con la señorita Arrowpoint, que se hallaba en pie con la señora Brackenshaw y un grupo de caballeros. La heredera invitó con la mirada a Gwendolen y le dijo:

—Espero que votará con nosotros, señorita Harleth, y el señor Grandcourt también, aunque no sea arquero. —Gwendolen y Grandcourt se pararon para unirse al grupo y descubrieron que la votación se refería a los planes de celebrar una merienda de arqueros en Cardell Chase, donde el entretenimiento nocturno sería más poético que un baile a la luz de unos candelabros, una fiesta bajo las luces del ocaso atravesando los claros del bosque, las ramas y las copas de los árboles.

A Gwendolen le pareció el plan magnífico, como si jugaran a Robin Hood y Maid Marian; y el señor Grandcourt, cuando se le preguntó por segunda vez, dijo que era algo que había que hacer; y a continuación, el señor Lush, que se hallaba detrás de la señora Brackenshaw, captó la atención de Gwendolen, diciendo con una mirada y en un tono familiar a Grandcourt:

—Diplow sería un buen lugar para la reunión, y más adecuado: hay una pequeña finca entre los robles hacia la puerta del norte.

No era posible mirar de una forma más inexpresiva como lo hizo Grandcourt, como si nadie le hubiera dirigido la palabra; pero Gwendolen se hizo cargo del hablante, decidiendo, en primer lugar, que debía tener la suficiente confianza con el arrendatario de Diplow, y, en segundo lugar, que ella nunca, si podía evitarlo, dejaría que se le acercara. Le causó una inmediata antipatía de orden físico: los ojos prominentes del señor Lush, su aspecto rechoncho aunque no torpe, y su espeso pelo encrespado, de un color oscuro intenso, salpicado con algunas canas, que junto con el resto de su próspera persona, era envidiado por muchos, creaban en ella una imagen fuertemente repulsiva. Para librarse de su mirada, murmuró a Grandcourt:

—Me gustaría continuar caminando.

Él obedeció inmediatamente; pero cuando estuvieron, de esta forma, lejos de cualquier oído, no pronunció una sola palabra durante varios minutos, y ella, inclinada a probarle, medio en broma, medio en serio, decidió no comenzar a hablar tampoco primero. Entraron en el largo conservatorio, preciosamente iluminado con lámparas chinas. Las otras parejas que había allí estaban a una distancia que no había interferido con su diálogo, mas con todo, caminaron en silencio hasta alcanzar el extremo más alejado donde lucía una tenue luz rosa que provenía de la segunda amplia apertura a la sala de baile. Grandcourt, cuando hubieron dado media vuelta, tomó aire y dijo lánguidamente:

—¿Le gustan este tipo de cosas?

Si hubieran descrito a Gwendolen la situación media hora antes, se habría reído con ganas, y solo podía imaginarse contestándole con una respuesta jocosa y satírica. Pero por alguna razón misteriosa —era un misterio del cual ella tenía una ligera maravillosa consciencia—, no se atrevió a ser satírica: había comenzado a sentir como si una varita mágica alrededor de ella le hiciese temer ofender a Grandcourt.

—Sí —dijo con tranquilidad, sin considerar a qué «tipo de cosas» se refería, si a las flores, a los aromas y al baile en general, o bien a caminar con el señor Grandcourt en particular. Y volvieron por el conservatorio sin más interpretaciones. Ella propuso entonces ir a sentarse a su antiguo sitio, y caminaron entre parejas diseminadas que preparaban el vals hacia el lugar donde la señora Davilow había estado sentada toda la noche. Mientras se acercaban, su sitio estaba vacío, pero ella estaba volviendo de nuevo, y para molestia y estremecimiento de Gwendolen, con el señor Lush en su brazo. No había manera de evitar la confrontación: su mamá se acercó a ella antes de que hubieran alcanzado los asientos, y, tras una sonrisa de bienvenida, dijo inocentemente—: Gwendolen, querida, deja que te presente al señor Lush. —Como había acabado de conocer a este personaje como compañero íntimo y constante del señor Grandcourt, la señora Davilow imaginó que era también deseable que su hija lo conociera.

Gwendolen apenas hizo una inclinación de cabeza, fue más bien un ligerísimo adelantamiento de su cabeza con respecto al resto de su fisonomía, e inmediatamente se movió hacia su sitio, diciendo:

—Quiero ponerme mi mantilla. —Antes de que alcanzara su sitio, el señor Lush estaba allí con la mantilla en la mano: para contrariar a esta joven señorita altiva, incurrió en la ofensa de anticiparse a Grandcourt, y sosteniendo la prenda cerca de Gwendolen, dijo—: ¿Me permite, por favor? —Pero ella, apartándose de él como si fuera un galgo enfangado, se deslizó hacia el otomán diciendo—: No, gracias.

Un hombre que hubiera perdonado esto tendría mucha conciencia cristiana, suponiendo que hubiera pretendido ser agradable con la joven señorita; pero antes de coger la mantilla, el señor Lush había dejado de tener esta intención. Grandcourt le quitó tranquilamente la prenda, y el señor Lush, con una leve inclinación, se apartó.

—Será mejor que se lo ponga —dijo el señor Grandcourt, mirándola sin cambiar de expresión.

—Gracias, tal vez será lo más prudente —dijo Gwendolen, levantándose, y doblándose con mucha gracia para colocarse la mantilla sobre sus hombros.

Después de esto, el señor Grandcourt intercambió unas pocas palabras de cortesía con la señora Davilow, y al marcharse, pidió permiso para llamar a Offendene al día siguiente. Claramente, él no estaba ofendido por el insulto dirigido contra su amigo. Ciertamente, que Gwendolen se negara a aceptar del señor Lush la mantilla estaba abierto a la interpretación que ella quería recibirlo del señor Grandcourt. Pero ella, pobre chica, no había tenido esta intención, sino que se había dejado llevar por su antipatía y predisposición, confiando en ellas como hacía con sus reflexiones más profundas, las cuales se introducían en ella como savia en el follaje. Gwendolen no pensaba que estos hombres fueran para ella oscuros enigmas, o que necesitase ayuda para sacar conclusiones sobre ellos —al menos sobre el señor Grandcourt—. La cuestión principal era hasta qué punto su carácter y sus maneras eran capaces de aplacar los deseos de ella; y a menos que fuera satisfecha en esto, se había dicho a sí misma que no aceptaría su declaración.

¿Podría haber una amenaza más tenue e insignificante en la historia de la humanidad que esta chica tan consciente, ocupada en deducir la forma en que podía hacer su vida más agradable? Y eso, en una época, además, en que las mismas ideas se convertían vigorosamente en ejércitos, y la humanidad se enzarzaba contra sí misma fieramente; en que las mujeres de la otra parte del mundo no lloraban a sus maridos e hijos que morían valientemente por una causa noble, y los hombres escasos de pan de nuestra parte del mundo oían esa pérdida ansiada y conservaban la paciencia; un tiempo en que el alma del hombre se despertaba por los latidos que durante siglos habían batido en él sin ser sentidos, hasta que la suma de todos ellos llevaba una nueva vida de terror o de alegría.

¿Qué son las chicas y sus ciegas visiones en medio de ese drama desaforado? Son el Sí o el No ordinario de ese bien por el que los hombres resisten y luchan. En estos delicados recipientes se vierten a través de los años el tesoro de los afectos humanos.

Capítulo 12

> ¡Eh, caballeros, el tiempo de la vida es corto!
> Gastar ese breve período villanamente,
> fuera demasiado largo, cuando la vida misma,
> galopando sobre la manecilla de un reloj,
> acabaría su viaje llegando en una hora.
>
> SHAKESPEARE, *Enrique IV*[56]

AL SEGUNDO DÍA DEL ENCUENTRO DE ARQUEROS, EL SEÑOR HENLEIGH MALLINGER Grandcourt estaba en su mesa de desayuno con el señor Lush. Todo lo que les rodeaba era agradable: el aire de verano a través de las ventanas abiertas, por las que los perros podían entrar desde el verde campo de césped; el colorido suave y ligeramente amoratado del parque del fondo dilatándose hacia una masa boscosa lindante; la vida tranquilla de la habitación, que parecía aún más tranquila por su elegancia sobria y antigua, como si mantuviera un silencio consciente y refinado, no como la inquietud que produce el mobiliario vulgar.

Que los caballeros fueran afables el uno con el otro era menos evidente. El señor Grandcourt había apartado su silla para estar de cara al jardín, y con su pierna izquierda sobre otra silla, y su codo derecho sobre la mesa, estaba fumando un largo puro, mientras su compañero todavía comía. Los perros —media docena de distintas razas que entraban y salían perezosamente, o tomaban actitudes de breve curiosidad— daban una indecisa preferencia primero a un caballero, y luego al otro; eran perros en tan buenas circunstancias que podían jugar con la comida: les encantaba que les sirvieran delicias que luego declinaban llevarse a la boca; todos menos Fetch, el precioso perro de aguas de vivos colores, que estaba sentado con sus patas delanteras firmes y su expresiva cara oscura mirando hacia arriba, observando a Grandcourt con constancia impertérrita. Este sostenía sobre las piernas a un diminuto perro maltés con un diminuto collar de plata y un cascabel, y cuando tenía libres una de sus manos del puro y de la taza de café, la descansaba sobre este pequeño saco de calor animal. Temo que Fetch estuviera celoso, y herido por que su amo no le dirigiera una sola palabra ni mirada; al final, parece que no pudo soportar más esta negligencia y puso con cuidado su larga

pata sedosa sobre la pierna de su amo. Grandcourt la miró sin mudar el rostro durante medio minuto, y entonces se tomó la molestia de dejar el puro, mientras elevaba a la desapasionada Fluff cerca de su barbilla le daba palmaditas cariñosas, al tiempo que miraba seriamente a Fetch, que, pobrecilla, gimoteaba sin interrupción, como si tratara de reprimir su descontento, y al final descansó su cabeza al lado de la pata que llamaba la atención, con una mirada suplicante que movía a compasión. Ante una situación así, al menos un amante de los perros habría comprendido a Fetch, y Grandcourt mantenía a tantos que se le consideraba como a un amante de ellos; su impulso a actuar de esta manera se derivó precisamente de esta interpretación. Pero cuando la divertida angustia se transformó en un potente ladrido, Grandcourt empujó a un lado a Fetch sin decir nada y puso con cuidado a Fluff sobre la mesa (donde su hocico negro resaltaba sobre el salero), miró al puro, y descubrió, con cierto enojo hacia Fetch por ser su causa, que requería volverse a encender. Fetch, habiendo empezado a colear, descubrió, como otros de su sexo, que no era fácil marcharse; de hecho, el segundo aullido fue más fuerte, como lo fue asimismo el tercero.

—Quítame de encima a este bruto, ¿quieres? —dijo Grandcourt a Lush, sin alzar su voz ni dirigiéndole la mirada, como si contara con su atención al menor signo.

Y Lush se levantó inmediatamente, cogió a Fetch en brazos, a pesar de que era bastante pesada y de que a él no le gustaba demasiado encorvarse, y se la llevó; le costó un par de minutos quitársela de encima, hasta que entró de nuevo. Entonces encendió un puro, se situó en una esquina donde podía ver el rostro de Grandcourt sin volverse, y dijo a continuación:

—¿Irás a caballo o en coche a Quetcham hoy?

—No voy a ir a Quetcham.

—No fuiste ayer.

Grandcourt fumó en silencio durante medio minuto, y luego dijo:

—Supongo que mandaste mi carta y te informaste.

—Fui yo mismo a las cuatro, y dije que seguro ibas a estar allí pronto. Ellos supondrían que algún accidente te previno de realizar tu intención. Sobre todo si vas hoy.

Silencio de un par de minutos. Luego dijo Grandcourt:

—¿Qué hombres están invitados aquí con sus mujeres?

Lush sacó una libreta.

—El Capitán y la señora Torrington vienen la semana que viene. Luego están el señor Hollis, y la señora Flora, y los Cushats, y los Gogoffs.

—Un grupo bastante desigual —remarcó Grandcourt al cabo de un rato—. ¿Por qué les pediste venir a los Gogoffs? Cuando escribas invitaciones en mi nombre, procura acordarte de darme una lista, en vez de traerme a una giganta sin mi conocimiento. Estropeará el aspecto de la sala.

—Invitaste tú mismo a los Gogoffs cuando te los encontraste en París.

—¿Qué tiene que ver que me los encontrara en París? Te dije que me dieras una lista.

Grandcourt, como muchos otros, tenía dos voces marcadamente diferentes. Hasta ahora le hemos oído hablar en una pronunciación lenta, superficial e interrumpida que sugería principalmente languidez y aburrimiento. Pero esta última breve conversación fue exteriorizada en tonos controlados y meditados, aunque distintos, que Lush había reconocido hace tiempo como la expresión de una voluntad perentoria.

—¿Hay más parejas que quieras invitar?

—Sí; piensa en gente decente, con una hija o dos. Y uno de tus malditos músicos. Pero no alguien cómico.

—Me pregunto si Klesmer consentiría en venir con nosotros cuando marche de Quetcham. La señorita Arrowpoint no aceptará más que música de primera clase.

Lush habló descuidadamente, pero estaba realmente buscando una oportunidad y observando atentamente a Grandcourt, que ahora por primera vez volvió su mirada hacia su compañero, pero lentamente, y sin hablar hasta haber dado un par de resoplidos suntuosos, cuando dijo, quizás en un tono más bajo que nunca, pero con un perceptible matiz de menosprecio:

—¡Qué tontería! ¿Qué tengo yo que ver con la señorita Arrowpoint y su música?

—Bueno, algo —dijo Lush jocosamente—. Tal vez no necesites preocuparte mucho. Pero hay que mantener ciertas formas cuando un hombre puede casarse con un millón.

—Muy acertado. Pero no voy a casarme con un millón.

—Es una lástima dejar escapar una oportunidad de este tipo, y desbaratar tus propios planes.

—*Tus* planes, supongo que te refieres.

—Tienes algunas deudas, ya sabes, y las cosas pueden torcerse después de todo. La herencia al título no es *absolutamente* segura.

Grandcourt no contestó y Lush prosiguió:

—Realmente es una buena oportunidad. El padre y la madre no piden nada mejor, lo veo, y las miradas y las formas de la hija no requieren disculpas, no más que si no tuviera seis peniques. No es hermosa; pero puede adaptarse a cualquier rango. Y no es probable que rechace las expectativas que puedes ofrecerle.

—Tal vez no.

—El padre y la madre te dejarían hacer lo que quieras con ellos.

—Pero no me gustaría hacer nada con ellos.

Esta vez fue Lush el que hizo una pequeña pausa antes de hablar de nuevo, tras la cual dijo con una profunda voz de protesta:

—¡Dios mío, Grandcourt! Después de tu experiencia, ¿dejarías que un desvarío interfiriera con tu cómoda posición en la vida?

—Ahórrate la oratoria. Ya sé lo que voy a hacer.

—¿Qué? —Lush dejó el puro y puso las manos en los bolsillos, como si tuviera que enfrentarse a algo exasperante, pero quisiera mantener el temple.

—Me voy a casar con la otra chica.

—¿Te has enamorado? —La pregunta contenía una intensa carga de mofa.

—Me voy a casar con ella.

—¿Te has declarado ya, entonces?

—No.

—Es una joven señorita con voluntad propia, imagino. Extremadamente bien capacitada para armar un escándalo. Sabe lo que le gusta.

—No le gustas —dijo Grandcourt, con el fantasma de una sonrisa.

—Absolutamente cierto —dijo Lush, añadiendo de nuevo con un tono marcadamente burlesco—: Sin embargo, si tú y ella os adoráis, será suficiente.

Grandcourt no hizo caso de la observación, sino que apuró su café, se levantó, y paseó por el césped con los perros siguiéndole tras él.

Lush le miró por un momento, luego retomó el puro y lo encendió, pero fumó despacio, acariciándose la barba con ojos críticos, hasta que finalmente la pellizcó con aire de haber llegado a una conclusión, y dijo, con voz contenida:

—¡Jaque, viejo!

Lush, siendo un hombre de cierta habilidad, no en vano conocía a Grandcourt desde hacía quince años, y había aprendido qué tipo de medidas no servían de nada con él, si bien determinar qué tipo eran útiles era a

menudo dudoso. Al principio de su carrera obtuvo una beca, y estuvo a punto de ordenarse para poder vivir de ello, pero al no gustarle las perspectivas aceptó en su lugar el oficio de compañero de viaje de un marqués, y después del joven Grandcourt, que hacía poco había perdido a su padre, y que encontró a Lush tan adecuado que le había permitido convertirse en primer ministro de todos sus asuntos más personales. La costumbre de los quince años hizo que Grandcourt necesitase cada vez más de la ayuda de Lush, y este que necesitase cada vez más del lujo ocioso en el que las transacciones en nombre de Grandcourt no habían dejado de producirse. No puedo decir que el mismo hábito continuo hubiera intensificado la falta de respeto de Grandcourt hacia su compañero puesto que esa falta llevaba produciéndose desde el principio, pero había confirmado su idea que podía patear a Lush si quisiera —solo que nunca decidió dar patadas a ningún animal, pues el acto de patear es una actitud comprometedora, y para un caballero debería ser otro quien sacudiera los perros por él—. Solo decía cosas que podían haberle expuesto a ser él el pateado si su confidente hubiera sido un hombre de espíritu independiente. ¿Pero cómo siendo el hijo de un vicario, que había limitado la vida de su mujer y de sus hijas para poder enviar a su hijo a Oxford, podía mantener un espíritu independiente participando en comidas de gran discreción, cabalgando con buenos caballos, viviendo generalmente entre el lujo más ostentoso, y todo ello sin trabajar? El señor Lush había pasado por estudiante una vez, y todavía se acordaba de las penas de tal condición a pesar de intentar no pensar mucho en ello; pero la soltería y otras artes que suavizan las formas son una preparación tradicional para los sinecuras[57]; y el presente y confortable abastecimiento era tan bueno como un sinecura al no requerir más que el olor del aprendizaje perdido. No ignoraba que podía ser pateado, pero prefería contar que era una más de las incalculables peculiaridades del carácter de Grandcourt, tan buena como cualquier otra. Como en su opinión, nunca había hecho una mala acción, no parecía necesario considerar si era probable que cometiese alguna si su interés por la buena vida lo requería. El interés por la buena vida de Lush estaba más que satisfecho por el momento, y aunque le lanzaran al polvo los manjares, él iba a recoger los trocitos de su interior y los encontraba exquisitos.

Esta mañana, por ejemplo, a pesar de haber encontrado más irritación que lo habitual, fue a su habitación privada y tocó una buena hora el violoncello.

Capítulo 13

Me regocijaré sobre Filistea[58].

QUE GRANDCOURT SE DECIDIERA A CASARSE CON LA SEÑORITA HARLETH MOSTRABA su potestad de adaptar los medios a los fines. Durante la siguiente quincena no hubo apenas un día en que por un arreglo u otro él no la viera, o probara mediante atenciones evidentes que ella ocupaba sus pensamientos. Su prima la señora Torrington hacía ahora el honor de ocupar su casa, de forma que la señora Davilow y Gwendolen podían ser invitadas a una gran fiesta en Diplow en la que había muchos testigos de cómo el anfitrión hacía los honores a la belleza sin recursos, y mostraba su indiferencia hacia la heredera. El mundo —me refiero al señor Gascoigne y a todas las familias respetables que vivían a una distancia que hacía posible las visitas a Pennicote— se convenció de ello, con lo que el Rector resolvió cumplir su deber con respecto a su sobrina y ver cuál sería la forma adecuada de proceder. De hecho, lo que les sorprendía a él y a la señora Davilow era que, a pesar de las innumerables ocasiones propicias, no hubiera sido hecha la declaración; y esta sorpresa afectaba al mismo Grandcourt. Cuando habló a Lush de su resolución, pensó que el asunto concluiría más rápidamente, y para su propia sorpresa, se había prometido repetidas veces una mañana que ese día daría a Gwendolen la oportunidad de aceptarle, y por la noche se encontró con que la formalidad necesaria no estaba todavía cumplida. Este hecho notable sirvió para reforzar su determinación al día siguiente. No llegó a pensar nunca que Gwendolen pudiera rechazarle, pero —¡que Dios nos ampare!— somos incapaces a menudo de actuar según nuestras certezas; nuestra oposición a un desenlace contrario (si es posible) es tan fuerte que levanta como una ilusión espectral entre nosotros y nuestra certeza: estamos racionalmente seguros que el lución no puede mordernos mortalmente, pero resultaría tan terrible que nos mordiera, y la criatura tiene una mirada con tantas ganas de morder, que preferimos no tocarla.

Había pedido que le trajeran un hermoso caballo suyo para que lo montara Gwendolen. La señora Davilow la acompañaría en el carruaje, e irían a Diplow a almorzar, con Grandcourt regentándolas. Era un buen día de la

temporada de media cosecha, no demasiado caluroso para que un paseo de mediodía de unas cinco millas resultara placentero: las amapolas resplandecían en los bordes de los campos, soplaba una brisa suave que se movía como un espíritu benéfico entre las cabezas del trigo no cortado, y que aleteaba las sombras de una nube a través de los acantilados blanquecinos: por aquí se veían ruedas de polea, por allá los caballos ejercitaban sus músculos sobre la última carga de un amplio espacio de rastrojos, pero en todas partes los verdes pastos formaban un amplio marco para los campos de trigo, y el ganado reposaba bajo anchas cepas. La carretera discurría por una parte del campo donde los granjeros se asemejaban a los que existían en los tiempos de nuestros antepasados —donde la paz y la permanencia parecían haber encontrado su hogar, lejos del cambio brusco que representaba el ferrocarril volando a lo lejos—.

Pero el espíritu de paz y permanencia no penetraron en el interior de la señora Davilow para hacerle superar su hábito de tener presentimientos angustiosos. Gwendolen y Grandcourt, a medio galope delante de ella, moderando el paso de vez en cuando para poder mantener una conversación y para esperar que el carruaje les alcanzara de nuevo, formaban una visión gratificante, pero que servía principalmente para sustentar el conflicto de esperanzas y temores sobre el futuro de su hija. Era esta una oportunidad irresistible para que un amante hablara y pusiera fin a todo tipo de incertidumbre, y la señora Davilow solo podía esperar temblando que la decisión de Gwendolen fuera favorable. Ciertamente, si el amor de Rex había sido repugnante para ella, el señor Grandcourt tenía la ventaja de no parecerse en nada a Rex; y que él hubiera producido en ella cierta impresión novedosa parecía evidente por su marcada abstinencia de observaciones satíricas, o más aún, su absoluto silencio sobre sus particularidades, un silencio que la señora Davilow no se atrevía romper. «¿Es un hombre con el que sería feliz?», era una pregunta que surgía inevitablemente en la mente de la señora Davilow. «Bueno, al menos sería tan feliz como con cualquier otro, o como la mayoría del resto de las mujeres», era la respuesta con la que procuraba tranquilizarse; pues no era capaz de imaginarse a Gwendolen bajo la influencia de ningún sentimiento que la satisficiera en lo que tradicionalmente llamamos «circunstancias humildes».

El propio pensamiento de Grandcourt iba en la misma dirección: quería haber acabado con la incertidumbre, que se debía a no haber hablado todavía.

En cuanto a cualquier otra incertidumbre —bueno, era algo sin ninguna base racional—, había algo en el aire que actuaba irritando sus deseos.

Gwendolen disfrutaba con el paseo, pero su placer no se materializó en una charla infantil y unas risas alegres impulsivas como lo hizo en aquella mañana con Rex: habló un poco, e incluso se rio, pero con una ligereza como de un eco lejano; también para ella había cierta peculiaridad en el aire —no era, de eso estaba segura, que su voluntad fuera a someterse a la del señor Grandcourt, ni las espléndidas perspectivas que él pretendía ofrecerle—; pues Gwendolen deseaba que todo el mundo entendiera, incluido el distinguido caballero, que ella actuaría siempre como quisiera, y que sería mejor que ellos no pensaran en cómo complacerla. Si ella le eligiese como marido le haría saber que no iba a renunciar a su libertad, o de acuerdo con su fórmula favorita: «No iba a hacer como habían hecho otras mujeres».

Los comentarios de Grandcourt esta mañana eran todos, como siempre, del mismo estilo breve que nunca dejan de alentar una conversación cuando el hablante es importante para él. Al parar de hablar tan pronto, daba la impresión de una habilidad contenida y formidable de poder decir más, además de tener la meritoria cualidad de permitir explayarse a los demás.

—¿Le gusta la forma de cabalgar de Criterion? —dijo después de entrar en el parque y de reducir la velocidad pasando del medio galope al paso.

—Es muy agradable de montar. Me encantaría dar un salto con él si no asustara a mamá. Había un canal bien ancho que pasamos hace cinco minutos. Me gustaría volver al galope y saltarlo.

—Hagámoslo. Lo podemos saltar juntos.

—No, gracias. Mamá es tan tímida, si me viera se podría poner enferma.

—Deje que vaya y se lo explique. Criterion lo saltaría sin problemas.

—No, de verdad, es usted muy amable, pero la alarmaría demasiado. Haría cualquier salto cuando no me viese; de hecho lo haré, pero no le diré nada.

—Podemos dejar pasar el carruaje, y dirigirnos allí.

—No, no, se lo ruego, no piense más en ello; hablaba un poco por hablar —dijo Gwendolen; comenzaba a entrever una nueva objeción a llevar a cabo su propia proposición.

—Pero la señora Davilow sabe que yo cuidaría de usted.

—Sí, pero lo que pensaría es que cuidaría de mi cuello roto.

Hubo una pausa considerable antes de que Grandcourt dijera, mirándola:

—Quisiera tener siempre el derecho de cuidar de usted.

Gwendolen no le devolvió la mirada; le pareció que tardó mucho en contestar, enrojeciendo primero, y luego palideciendo, aunque para el modo de ver de Grandcourt ella contestó enseguida, en un tono lo más dulce posible y con un descuidado movimiento de cabeza:

—Oh, no tengo tan claro que yo quiera ser cuidada: si eligiera arriesgarme a romperme el cuello, me gustaría tener la libertad de hacerlo.

Paró su caballo mientras hablaba, y acomodó la silla, mirando hacia el carruaje que avanzaba. Sus ojos se cruzaron con los de Grandcourt mientras hacía este movimiento, pero no había en ellos palabras de reprensión por la desenvoltura de su respuesta. En ese mismo momento, ella se dio cuenta de que estaba arriesgando algo, no su cuello, sino la posibilidad de frenar finalmente las intenciones de Grandcourt, y no se sintió contenta con tal posibilidad.

«¡Maldita sea ella!», pensó Grandcourt, mientras paraba asimismo su caballo. No era un pensador palabrero, y esta exclamación explosiva permaneció mezclada entre impresiones que los intérpretes elocuentes habrían extendido a varias frases que contuviesen el sentimiento irritado de que estaba siendo ofuscado y la determinación de que esta chica no iba tomarle el pelo. ¿Acaso quería ella que se lanzase a sus pies y declarase que se moría por su amor? No era por esa puerta por la que ella entraría en los privilegios que él podía darle. ¿O es que esperaba que escribiera su declaración? Una quimera igualmente. No haría su declaración de ninguna forma en que le dejara a él en posición de ser rechazado. Pero en cuanto a aceptarle a él, ella ya lo había hecho aceptando sus marcadas atenciones; y cualquier cosa que sucediera que las desmoronara sería considerado en perjuicio de ella. ¿Entonces estaba simplemente coqueteando?

No obstante, el carruaje se acercó, de forma que no podía ocurrir ningún cara a cara más hasta su llegada a la casa, donde había compañía abundante, para la que Gwendolen, vestida en ropa de montar, con su sombrero puesto a un lado, y revestida también con la reputación de ser la elegida del señor Grandcourt, era naturalmente el centro de atención; y dado que el inaceptable señor Lush no estaba allí para observarla, el estímulo de la admiración alentó su espíritu, y dispersó, por un tiempo, el desasosiego de su conciencia, que la amenazaba con impulsos de arrepentimiento de sus propios actos. De si había ofendido o no a Grandcourt no podía decirse nada: sus maneras no habían cambiado, pero la agudeza de Gwendolen no había profundizado más que

para discernir que sus maneras no daban ninguna pista, y porque estas no hubieran cambiado, no por ello le temía menos.

Ella no había estado antes en Diplow salvo para comer; y puesto que había ciertos puntos de vista desde la ventana y el jardín que valían la pena, la señora Flora Hollis propuso tras el almuerzo, cuando algunos de los invitados se hubieron dispersado y el sol se acercaba a las cuatro de la tarde, que el grupo que quedaba, fuera a explorar un poco. Entonces tuvo Grandcourt varias oportunidades para retener aparte a Gwendolen y hablarle sin ser oído. ¡Pero no! Ciertamente no habló con nadie más, pero lo que le dijo a ella lo hizo con menos ilusión e intimidad que lo que lo había hecho en su primera conversación. La observó no menos que lo habitual; y ella, que había retomado su espíritu desafiador, le devolvió la mirada, sin importarle —más bien, prefiriendo—, que sus ojos no tuvieran expresión.

Pero daba la sensación de que él tramaba algo. Poco después de que hubieron terminado el paseo por los campos, todo el grupo se paró en el estanque para ser entretenidos por Fetch, que intentaba traer un nenúfar a la orilla como Beau, el perro de aguas de Cowper, y habiendo fracasado en su primer intento, insistía de nuevo.

En esto, Grandcourt, que permanecía al lado de Gwendolen fuera del grupo, se volvió deliberadamente, y fijando su mirada en una loma plantada con arbustos americanos, y que tenía un sinuoso camino de subida, dijo lánguidamente:

—Esto es un aburrimiento. ¿Subimos allí?

—Oh, por supuesto, ya que estamos explorando —dijo Gwendolen. Le apetecía la idea, aunque todavía estaba algo asustada.

El camino era demasiado estrecho para que él pudiera ofrecerle el brazo, y caminaron en silencio. Cuando alcanzaron el trozo de llanura en la cima, Grandcourt dijo:

—No hay nada que ver desde aquí: no valía la pena subir.

¿Cómo es que Gwendolen no rio? Permanecía en completo silencio, sosteniendo los pliegues de su vestido como una estatua, y aferrándose fuertemente a la empuñadura de su látigo, que había agarrado automáticamente junto con su sombrero cuando partieron por primera vez.

—¿Qué tipo de lugar le gusta a usted? —dijo Grandcourt.

—Cada lugar es agradable a su manera. En definitiva, creo que prefiero lugares abiertos y alegres. No me gustan los sitios sombríos.

—Su casa en Offendene es demasiado sombría.

—Lo es, más bien.

—Usted no se quedará en ella mucho tiempo, espero.

—Oh, sí, yo creo que sí. A mamá le gusta estar cerca de su hermana.

Silencio durante una breve pausa.

—Se supone que *usted* no va a vivir siempre allí, aunque la señora Davilow lo haga.

—No lo sé. Nosotras las mujeres no podemos ir por ahí en busca de aventuras, a encontrar el Paso del Noroeste o el nacimiento del Nilo, o cazar tigres en el Este. Debemos quedarnos donde crecemos, o donde los jardineros quieran trasplantarnos. Somos llevadas como flores, hemos de parecer tan hermosas como podemos, y estar aburridas sin quejarnos. Esa es mi noción de las plantas: se aburren a menudo, y esa es la razón por la que algunas de ellas tienen veneno. ¿Qué piensa usted? —Gwendolen había hablado más bien aprisa y un poco nerviosa, fustigando ligeramente el rododendro que tenía enfrente.

—Estoy de acuerdo. La mayoría de las cosas aburren —dijo Grandcourt, dejando que su mente corriera libre, lejos de su pretensión inicial. Pero tras un momento de reflexión, continuó con su pausado, interrumpido y distinguido estilo:

—Pero una mujer puede casarse.

—Algunas pueden.

—Usted puede ciertamente, a menos que sea obstinadamente cruel.

—No creo que yo sea ni cruel ni obstinada. —Gwendolen volvió de repente el rostro hacia Grandcourt y le miró cara a cara. Sentía que los ojos de él hubieran estado continuamente sobre ella a lo largo de toda la conversación. Se preguntaba qué efecto tendría sobre ella más que sobre él el hecho de mirarle.

Él permaneció tranquilo, a media yarda[59] o algo más de ella, la cual pensó por un instante que se había apoderado de él una especie de estupor fantasioso, que a su vez la estaba contagiando a ella. Luego, él dijo:

—¿Está usted tan insegura sobre sí misma como hace sentir a los demás sobre usted?

—Estoy bastante insegura sobre mí misma; no sé cuán inseguros pueden estar los demás.

—¿Y desea que entiendan que a usted no le importa? —dijo Grandcourt, con un toque de nueva dureza en su tono.

—Yo no he dicho eso —replicó Gwendolen dudando, y apartando los ojos, fustigó de nuevo al rododendro. Deseó haber ido a caballo para poder alejarse a medio galope. Era imposible alejarse corriendo loma abajo.

—Le importa, entonces —dijo Grandcourt, no más rápido, sino al contrario, con suave y lenta dicción.

—¡Ay, mi látigo! —exclamó Gwendolen con un pequeño grito de angustia. Lo había dejado ir, ¿qué podía ser más natural tras un leve sobresalto?, y (pero esto pareció menos natural en un látigo con la empuñadura de oro que había sido abandonado a su suerte) había ido a parar con cierta fuerza sobre unos arbustos cercanos, y había quedado entrelazado en las ramas de una azalea a medio camino en la loma. Ella pudo entonces correr, riendo con ganas, y Grandcourt se vio obligado a seguirla; pero ella llegó antes a rescatar el látigo, y continuó en su camino hacia el nivel del terreno, donde se paró y miró a Grandcourt con un brillo exasperante en sus ojos y un color más pronunciado, como si hubiera conseguido una victoria, y estas manifestaciones fueron aún observables para la señora Davilow cuando Gwendolen y Grandcourt se unieron al resto del grupo.

«Todo es coquetería», pensó Gandcourt; «la próxima vez que la seduzca no se resistirá».

Le pareció probable que esta seducción final pasaría al día siguiente, cuando se iba a celebrar la merienda del Encuentro de Arqueros en Cardell Chase, según se había acordado la noche del baile.

Incluso para Gwendolen el resultado era una de las dos posibilidades, que se presentaban alternativamente, una de las dos decisiones hacia la que se estaba precipitando, como si fueran las dos caras de una misma moneda, y no sabía de qué lado caería. Estar sujeta a su propia naturaleza, la cual no podía predecir, le causó cierto asombro y espanto: su lema favorito para la vida —hacer lo que quería— parecía fallarle; y no podía prever qué quería hacer en un momento dado. Las perspectivas de casarse con Grandcourt le parecían verdaderamente más atractivas que lo que había creído de antemano pudiera ser cualquier matrimonio: la dignidad, el lujo, el poder de hacer en gran parte lo que quisiera; ahora que se le presentaba tan cercana la oportunidad, y que de su elección dependía el asegurarla o perderla, se apoderó de su naturaleza esa perspectiva como si fuera el fuerte aroma de lo que antes solo había imaginado o anhelado. ¿Y Grandcourt? Parecía tener un destino perfecto, el máximo que pueda tener un amante o un marido. Gwendolen deseaba montar en el carruaje y conducir los caballos ella misma, con un esposo a su lado que

la rodeara con sus brazos y le ofreciera un rostro que no fuera ridículo. Ciertamente con toda su perspicacia, y todas las lecturas que a su mamá le parecían peligrosamente instructivas, su criterio era conscientemente un poco culpable ante Grandcourt. Él era adorablemente tranquilo y libre de absurdidades —sería un marido *en suite*[60] con el mejor aspecto con el que podría presentarse una mujer—. ¿Pero qué más era él? Había estado en todas partes, y lo había visto todo. *Eso* era deseable, y especialmente gratificante como preámbulo a su preferencia suprema por Gwendolen Harleth. No aparecía como alguien que disfrutara mucho de nada. Eso no era necesario: y cuantos menos gustos o deseos particulares tuviera, más libertad tendría seguramente su mujer en seguir con los suyos. Gwendolen pensó que tras la boda probablemente sería capaz de manejarlo a su antojo.

¿Cómo es que ahora él le causaba una restricción inusual? ¿Cómo era menos atrevida y divertida en sus conversaciones con él que con cualquier otro admirador que hubiera conocido? Esa ausencia de demostración de sus sentimientos que a ella tanto le gustaba, actuaba como un encanto en más de un sentido, y era ligeramente hipnotizante. Grandcourt, después de todo, era formidable —un apuesto lagarto de una especie hasta ahora desconocida, no del tipo animoso o precipitado—. Pero Gwendolen apenas sabía nada sobre lagartos, y la ignorancia le da a una un amplio rango de probabilidades. Este espléndido espécimen era probablemente manso, idóneo como un animal de compañía para mujeres: ¿qué no puede ser un lagarto, si no sabes nada sobre ellos? Su conocimiento de Grandcourt era tal que ningún talento revelado repentinamente la habría sorprendido. Y él era tan poco sugestivo para el drama, que apenas se le ocurrió pensar con detalle cómo había pasado los treinta y seis años de su vida: en general, ella le imaginaba siempre frío y ennoblecido, no era probable que se hubiera comprometido nunca. Había cazado el tigre, ¿había estado alguna vez enamorado, o se había declarado? Tanto una experiencia como la otra parecían igual de remotas en la imagen que Gwendolen se había hecho del señor Grandcourt que había venido a Diplow aparentemente a marcar un gran hito en el destino de ella —quizás conduciéndola al estado del matrimonio, un estado del que había decidido que gozaría de más libertad que del de su infancia—. Y, en definitiva, deseaba casarse con él, pues encajaba con su propósito; su intención predominante y meditada era aceptarle.

¿Pero iba a ser ella la destinataria de su meditada intención? Comenzaba a temer de sí misma, y a encontrar cierta dificultad en hacer lo que quería. Ya la

afirmación de su independencia al evadir sus insinuaciones la había llevado más lejos de lo necesario, y pensaba con cierta ansiedad qué haría en la siguiente ocasión.

Sentada según su costumbre de espaldas a los caballos en su camino hacia casa, era observada atentamente por su mamá, quien tomó la excitación y el cambio de la expresión de sus ojos, su insólita distracción y completo silencio como señales inequívocas de que algo sin precedentes había sucedido entre ella y Grandcourt. El desasosiego de la señora Davilow la aventuró a arriesgarse a hablar del tema: los Gascoigne iban a cenar a Offendene, y por lo que había sucedido esta mañana había razones para consultar al Rector; no es que esperara que tuviese más influencia sobre Gwendolen que ella, pero podía conseguir que descargara su ansiedad.

—¿Ha ocurrido algo, querida? —empezó, con una delicada entonación de pregunta.

Gwendolen miró a su alrededor, y como si se diera cuenta de ser consciente de sí misma, se sacó los guantes, luego el sombrero, para que la suave brisa soplara sobre su cabeza. Estaban un poco apartados del camino, donde caían las largas sombras de la tarde que provenían de los árboles, sin observadores a la vista. Sus ojos se encontraron con los de su madre, pero no dijo nada.

—¿El señor Grandcourt te ha dicho algo? Dime, querida. —Las últimas palabras fueron pronunciadas suplicantemente.

—¿Qué tengo que decirte, mamá? —fue la perversa respuesta.

—Estoy segura que algo te ha estremecido. Deberías confiar en mí, Gwen. No deberías dejarme en la duda y en la ansiedad. —Los ojos de la señora Davilow se llenaron de lágrimas.

—Mamá, por favor, no te pongas triste —dijo Gwendolen, con ligeras protestas—. Solo consigues que yo me ponga más. Yo misma tengo dudas.

—¿Sobre las intenciones del señor Grandcourt? —dijo la señora Davilow, reuniendo valor por encima de sus ansiedades.

—No, en absoluto —dijo Gwendolen, algo bruscamente, y ladeando de una forma preciosa la cabeza mientras se ponía el sombrero de nuevo.

—¿Sobre si le aceptarás, entonces?

—Precisamente.

—¿Le has dado una respuesta ambigua?

—No le he dado ningún tipo de respuesta.

—¿Y él ha hablado de forma que no se pueda malinterpretar?

—Tanto como le he dejado.

—¿Esperas que persista? —la señora Davilow formuló la pregunta más bien inquieta, y al no recibir respuesta, preguntó otra—: ¿No crees que le hayas desanimado?

—Diría que no.

—Pensaba que te agradaba, querida —dijo la señora Davilow, tímidamente.

—Y me agrada, mamá, dentro de lo que cabe. Hay menos de desagradable en él que en la mayoría de los hombres. Es tranquilo y distinguido. —Hasta aquí Gwendolen habló un poco enfurruñada y con cierta pesantez; pero de pronto recuperó parte de su malicia, y su cara se contrajo en una sonrisa cuando añadió—: Ciertamente tiene todas las cualidades que harían a un marido tolerable: almenajes, galerías, caballerizas, etc., sin muecas ni monóculo en su ojo.

—Sé seria conmigo por un momento, querida. ¿Tengo que entender que le vas a aceptar?

—Oh, te lo ruego, mamá, déjame sola —dijo Gwendolen, con algo de desconsuelo en su voz.

Y la señora Davilow no dijo nada más.

Cuando llegaron a casa, Gwendolen dijo que no iba a cenar, que estaba cansada, y que bajaría por la noche después de haber descansado un poco. La posibilidad de que su tío oyera lo que había pasado no la preocupaba. Estaba convencida de que cualquiera que fuese su opinión sería en el sentido de aceptar a Grandcourt, cosa que ella deseaba si pudiera. En ese momento habría deseado tener lastres colgados de su propio capricho.

El señor Gascoigne oyó, no las respuestas literales de Gwendolen, sino un relato generalizado y suavizado de ellas. La madre transmitió, tan imprecisamente como las penetrantes preguntas del Rector se lo permitían, la impresión de que Gwendolen no acababa de aclararse, pero que se inclinaba por aceptarlo. El resultado fue que el tío se sintió llamado a intervenir: no creía que cumpliría con su deber dejando a su sobrina libre en una crisis trascendental de este tipo. La señora Davilow expresó su opinión vacilante de que quizás sería más seguro no decir nada —Gwendolen era tan sensible (no quiso decir arbitraria)—. Pero el Rector era de mentalidad firme, se aferraba a sus primeras impresiones tenazmente y actuaba conforme a ellas con prontitud, sin importarle las diferentes impresiones contrarias a las primeras

que luego le asaltaban, y que no consideraba más que como sombras que cruzaban el firme camino sobre el que se asentaba.

Este enlace con Grandcourt se presentaba para él como una especie de asunto público; quizás hasta había formas en las que se podía reforzar la Institución. Para el Rector, cuyo padre (nadie lo habría sospechado ni a nadie se le dijo) había llegado a ser un comerciante provincial de grano, la herencia aristocrática se asemejaba a la herencia real al exceptuar al poseedor del criterio ordinario en asuntos morales. Grandcourt, el casi seguro baronet y probablemente noble en el futuro, iba a estar entre los personajes públicos, y representaba un nexo que iba a ser aceptado en los amplios campos generales nacional y eclesiástico. Tales personajes públicos, es cierto, son a menudo eminencias de las que una comunidad ancestral puede sentir orgullo y seguridad si cuenta con ellas, aunque, observadas en privado, estas eminencias de nacimiento son frecuentemente inoportunas y hasta ofensivas. Pero del futuro marido, personalmente, el señor Gascoigne estaba dispuesto a pensar lo mejor. Las habladurías son como el humo que proviene de las sucias pipas de tabaco de los que lo expelen: no prueban más que el mal gusto del fumador. Pero si Grandcourt había hecho realmente locuras más grandes o desafortunadas que las del resto de jóvenes de altas expectativas, estaba ya en una edad de haber abandonado esa práctica. Todos los errores pueden ser sanados mientras un hombre no se arruine a sí mismo, y el coste puede ser considerado como un seguro contra errores futuros. Este era el punto de vista de la sabiduría práctica; por lo que respecta a otros puntos de vista más elevados, el arrepentimiento tenía un valor supremo moral y religioso. Todas las razones apuntaban a que una mujer sensata sería feliz con Grandcourt.

No fue una sorpresa para Gwendolen al bajar a tomar el té que le dijeran que su tío deseaba verla en el comedor. Cuando entró, él apartó el periódico y la saludó con su amabilidad habitual. Como había remarcado su mujer, siempre tomaba demasiado en serio a Gwendolen, y más todavía recientemente.

—Querida —dijo en un tono paternal, acercándole una silla mientras le tomaba de la mano—, quiero hablarte de un tema que es más trascendental que cualquier otro con respecto a tu bienestar. Ya debes adivinar lo que quiero decir. Pero te hablaré claramente: en tales asuntos me considero obligado a actuar como un padre. No tienes inconveniente, ¿verdad?

—Oh, no, querido tío. Siempre has sido muy amable conmigo —dijo Gwendolen francamente. Esta noche estaba deseosa, si era posible, de

reforzarse un poco mentalmente contra su problemática naturaleza, y su resistente temperamento se hallaba suspendido. La forma de hablar del Rector siempre llevaba consigo una sensación de autoridad, como una palabra de mando: parecía dar por sentado que su audiencia no vacilaría, y que todo el mundo iba a ser racionalmente obediente.

—Constituye naturalmente una satisfacción para mí que las expectativas de un matrimonio para ti, ventajoso en grado sumo, se hayan presentado tan pronto. No sé exactamente qué ha pasado entre tú y el señor Grandcourt, pero supongo que apenas quedan dudas, por la forma en que te ha atendido, que desea convertirte en su mujer.

Gwendolen no habló inmediatamente, y su tío dijo con más énfasis:

—¿Tienes tú alguna duda al respecto, querida?

—Supongo que eso es lo que ha estado pensando. Pero puede haber cambiado mañana de opinión —dijo Gwendolen.

—¿Por qué mañana? ¿Te ha hecho ya alguna insinuación y le has desanimado?

—Creo que es lo que él pretendía, comenzó a hacer proposiciones, pero las corté enseguida. Cambié de conversación.

¿Confías en mí como para decirme tus motivos?

—No estoy segura de que tuviera ningún motivo, tío —Gwendolen río algo forzadamente.

—Eres perfectamente capaz de razonar, Gwendolen. Eres consciente de que esta no es una ocasión trivial, que concierne al asentamiento de tu vida, y que se está dando bajo unas circunstancias que pueden no volver a repetirse. Tienes en esto un deber para contigo y tu familia. Me gustaría entender si tienes alguna razón para dudar de aceptar al señor Grandcourt.

—Supongo que dudo sin motivos —Gwendolen habló algo enfurruñada, y su tío se fiaba cada vez menos.

—¿Es él desagradable para ti?

—No.

—¿Has oído algo de él que te ha producido una sensación desagradable? —El Rector pensó que era imposible que Gwendolen hubiera oído las habladurías que había oído él, pero en cualquier caso tenía que esforzarse por poner las cosas claras ante ella.

—No he oído nada sobre él salvo que es un buen partido —dijo Gwendolen con cierta insolencia—; y eso me produce una sensación muy agradable.

—Entonces, mi querida Gwendolen, no tengo nada más que decir que esto: tienes la fortuna en tus manos, una fortuna que rara vez ocurre a una chica en tus circunstancias, una fortuna, de hecho, que casi obliga a excluir todo sentimiento personal y hace que tu aceptación sea un deber. Si la Providencia te ofrece poder y posición, especialmente cuando no vienen contrariadas por ninguna condición repulsiva para ti, tu camino está lleno de responsabilidad, y en él no debe caber el capricho. A un hombre no le gusta que se juegue con su afecto: puede no ser desalentado enseguida, estas cosas son asuntos de carácter personal. Pero el coqueteo puede ser llevado demasiado lejos. Y debo señalarte que en el caso de que desalentaras al señor Grandcourt sin haberle rechazado, sin haberte propuesto al fin rechazarle, tu situación sería muy humillante y penosa. Yo, por mi parte, te miraría con severa desaprobación, como la víctima de nada más que tu coquetería y tu locura.

Gwendolen se puso pálida al escuchar este discurso de amonestación. Las ideas que sugería tenían la fuerza de las sensaciones. Su resistente coraje no iba a ayudarla en esto, puesto que su tío no estaba forzándola en contra de su propia resolución; la presionaba con las cuestiones que la asustaban; la estaba haciendo más consciente de los riesgos que implicaba su conducta. Estaba callada, y el Rector observó que había producido un fuerte efecto en ella.

—Te lo digo desde el cariño, querida. —Su tono se había suavizado.

—Soy consciente de ello, tío —dijo Gwendolen, levantándose y sacudiéndose hacia atrás la cabeza, como si se desperezara de una pasividad dolorosa—. No soy tonta. Ya sé que debo casarme alguna vez, antes de que sea demasiado tarde. Y no veo que pueda hacerlo mejor que con el señor Grandcourt. Me refiero a aceptarlo, si es posible. —Se sentía como si estuviera reafirmándose al hablar con tanta decisión a su tío.

Pero el Rector quedó asombrado al oír una versión tan clara de su propio discurso de labios tan jóvenes. Deseaba que su consejo hubiera calado en su interior en la forma de sentimientos decentes para una chica, tales como los que se sobreentienden en el consejo de un clérigo, aunque él pueda no considerarlos siempre como apropiados para ponerlos en práctica. Quería para su sobrina tierras, carruajes, un título —todo lo que hiciera agradable la estancia en este mundo—; pero también quería que ella no fuera cínica, sino al contrario, religiosamente obediente, y con una cálida devoción doméstica.

—Mi querida Gwendolen —dijo, levantándose a su vez, y hablando con benigna gravedad—, confío en que encontrarás en el matrimonio una nueva

fuente de obligaciones y de afectos. El matrimonio es el único ámbito verdadero y satisfactorio para una mujer, y si felizmente se decidiera tu enlace con el señor Grandcourt, tendrías probablemente un creciente poder, tanto de rango como de riquezas, que podría usarse para beneficio de otros. Estas consideraciones son más elevadas que el puro romance. Tú estás llamada por naturaleza a una posición que, considerando tu nacimiento y tus expectativas, apenas podría esperarse en el curso normal de los acontecimientos; y confío en que la embellecerás no solo con tus dones personales, sino también con una vida generosa y consecuente.

—Espero que mamá sea la más feliz de todos —dijo Gwendolen, algo más animada, llevándose las manos a la nuca y dirigiéndose hacia la puerta. Habría querido renunciar a tan altas consideraciones.

El señor Gascoigne tuvo la impresión de haber llegado a un acuerdo satisfactorio con su sobrina, y que había asegurado su felicidad en la vida al animarla a casarse con Grandcourt. Mientras, había otra persona para la que la contemplación de ese desenlace había sido un motivo de cierta actividad, y que creía que también él en ese día particular había hecho algo para provocar una decisión favorable en *su* sentido —y que resultaba haber sido la contraria a la del Rector—.

La ausencia del señor Lush de Diplow durante la visita de Gwendolen no se debía a ningún tipo de temor por su parte de encontrarse con esa jovencita altiva, o de ser avergonzado por su franca aversión, sino a una cita de la que esperaba importantes consecuencias. Había ido, de hecho, a la estación de Wancester a encontrarse con una dama acompañada de una sirvienta y dos niños, a los cuales no hizo mucho caso, y después la siguió al hotel de las Llaves Doradas en esa ciudad. Una mujer imponente, a la cual muchos se girarían para verla de nuevo al pasar; su figura era esbelta y suficientemente alta, su rostro se hallaba algo extenuado, lo que acentuaba su belleza escultural; su cabello rizado era completamente negro, y también sus largos y ávidos ojos eran oscuros. Su vestido era sobriamente correcto, su edad tal vez físicamente más avanzada de lo que suponían el número de sus años, que apenas llegaban a treinta y siete. Una mujer que parecía intranquila: su mirada parecía admitir que la gente y las cosas le iban a ser desfavorables, a pesar de que estaba dispuesta a afrontarlas con valentía. Los niños eran encantadores: una niña de pelo oscuro de unos seis años o algo más y un niño más rubio de cinco años. Cuando Lush incautamente manifestó su sorpresa por haber traído a los niños, ella dijo en un tono agudo:

—¿Creías que iba a pasearme sola por aquí? ¿Por qué no iba a traerlos si quisiera?

—Oh, por supuesto —dijo Lush, con su habitual indiferencia al hablar.

Permaneció más o menos una hora hablando con ella, y regresó de nuevo a Diplow en un estado que era a la vez esperanzador y animadamente anheloso con relación a la ejecución del pequeño plan sobre el que se basaba su esperanza. La unión de Grandcourt con Gwendolen Harleth no haría bien, creía, a ninguno de ambos, y le acarrearía pésimas consecuencias para él mismo. Pero ahora se sentía lo suficientemente seguro para exclamar para sí: «Apuesto a que el matrimonio no se llevará a cabo jamás».

Capítulo 14

> No me engalanaré con joyas gastadas o usadas,
> arrancadas de los dedos entumecidos de las mujeres ahogadas;
> no sentiré las manos frías y vaporosas de fantasmas encolerizados
> apoderándose de mi gargantilla; no ataviaré mi pecho virgen
> con la herencia de los huérfanos. Deja que tu amada ya muerta
> se case con los muertos.

A LA MAÑANA SIGUIENTE, GWENDOLEN TENÍA UN ASPECTO AGRADABLE Y ANIMOSO como un lirio de tallo alto recién abierto; había en ella una reacción de juvenil energía, y la desconfianza de sí misma del día anterior no parecía más que la agitación pasajera de la superficie de un arroyo rebosante. La competición de arquería ambulante en Cardell Chase se presentaba como una expectativa magnífica para practicar el deporte: se sentía ya de antemano moviéndose como una ninfa del bosque bajo las hayas (en compañía de gente que la apreciaría), y en la escena imaginaria se deleitaba también con el encanto de las siguientes atenciones por parte de Grandcourt —no una lírica Dafne sin pasión en cuanto a la ninfa del bosque, ciertamente: algo mucho mejor—. Hoy Gwendolen se lo imaginaba acercándose lentamente y con rodeos a una declaración, y se veía a sí misma esperando y animándole de acuerdo con la conclusión racional que había expresado a su tío.

Cuando bajó a desayunar (después de que todo el mundo salvo la señora Davilow hubiera abandonado la mesa) había cartas en su plato. Una de ellas la leyó con una sonrisa contenida, y se la entregó a su mamá, quien, al devolvérsela, sonrió también, hallando una nueva alegría en el buen humor que su hija había mostrado desde que se había levantado, y dijo:

—No te apetece trasladarte a mil millas de distancia, ¿verdad?

—No tan lejos exactamente.

—Fue una triste omisión no haber escrito otra vez después de esto. ¿No puedes escribir ahora, antes de que salgamos esta mañana?

—No hay tanta prisa. Mañana estará bien. Ya ves que ellos marchan del pueblo hoy. Tengo que escribir a Dover. Ellos estarán allí hasta el lunes.

—¿Puedo escribir yo por ti, querida, si te incomoda?

Gwendolen no dijo nada inmediatamente; pero tras sorber su café respondió bruscamente:

—¡Oh, no, déjalo estar! Escribiré yo mañana. —Entonces, sintiendo un pinchazo de remordimiento, alzó la vista y dijo con ternura jocosa—: ¡Mi querida, vieja, preciosa mamá!

—¡Pues sí, niña, vieja!

—No, por favor, mamá. Quería decir adorable con lo de vieja. Apenas eres veinticinco años mayor que yo. Cuando hablas de esa forma mi vida se marchita ante mí.

—Una puede tener mucha felicidad por delante en veinticinco años, querida.

—No debo perder tiempo en empezar —dijo Gwendolen alegremente—. Cuanto antes consigamos mis palacios y carruajes, mejor.

—Y un buen marido que te adore, Gwen —dijo la señora Davilow, alentándola.

Gwendolen encogió sus labios con malicia sin decir nada.

Era un ligero perjuicio para su felicidad incipiente que el Rector estuviera retenido por negocios de magistrado y que probablemente no fuera a llegar a Cardell Chase en todo el día. Le importaba poco que la señora Gascoigne y Anna decidieran no ir sin él, pero la presencia de su tío parecía que habría dado por sentado que se actuaría según la decisión tomada. Pues la misma decisión empezaba a ser formidable. Al estar a punto de aceptar a Grandcourt, Gwendolen sentía que esta plenitud inesperada se consolidaba demasiado rápido: cuando deseamos algo para nosotros mismos, lo que conseguimos enseguida se vuelve en mera limitación y exclusión. Con todo, todavía conservaba la convicción tranquilizadora de que el matrimonio sería la puerta para una libertad mayor.

El lugar de encuentro era una zona herbosa llamada la Enramada Verde, cubierta a modo de anfiteatro por un trozo de bosque elevado. Era aquí donde los sirvientes, que venían en un coche lleno de provisiones tenían que preparar la merienda; y un guía de la casa conduciría a los arqueros ambulantes para mantenerlos a la debida distancia de este centro, e impedir que se perdieran más allá del límite que había sido fijado —una curva que podía ser dibujada con ciertos puntos bien conocidos, tales como el Doble Roble, las Piedras Susurrantes, y la Cruz Alta—. El plan era dar solo un paseo preliminar antes del almuerzo, reservando lo principal de la expedición ambulante para las luces más excelsas de la tarde. Los grupos se formaron lo suficientemente rápido para ahorrar a cada uno los pesados momentos de espera, y cuando estos comenzaron a desperdigarse a través de las luces y

sombras que formaban en algunos puntos las hayas estrechamente cercanas, y en otros los robles, más separados, es de suponer que a un pintor le habría gustado observar la escena. La arquería ambulante era mucho más hermosa que el juego en un mismo sitio, pero el éxito en los disparos en marcas variables no era tan favorecido por la práctica, y los aciertos fueron distribuidos entre los arqueros voluntarios de forma distinta a como lo habrían logrado en el disparo a una diana fija. Por esta razón, tal vez, así como por la doble distracción de estar preocupada y no desvelar su preocupación, Gwendolen no se distinguió mucho en estos primeros ejercicios, salvo en la viva finura con la que aceptó su actual fracaso. Iba de blanco y de verde como en el día del anterior Encuentro de Arqueros, en el que quedó marcada por conocer a Grandcourt; él estaba continuamente a su lado ahora, aunque habría sido difícil decir por solo sus miradas y sus maneras que su relación había cambiado desde su primera conversación. Con todo, había otros motivos que hacían presagiar a la mayoría de las personas que si no estaban aún comprometidos, pronto lo estarían. Y ella también lo creía. Mientras todos iban regresando a la Enramada Verde en grupos divergentes, sin pensar en absoluto en apuntar sus flechas sino simplemente en conversar, ellos dos se cruzaron palabras que parecían realmente el principio de ese fin: el principio de su aceptación. Gradocurt dijo:

—¿Sabe cuánto tiempo hace que la vi por primera vez con ese vestido?

—El Encuentro de Arqueros fue el día 25, y hoy estamos a 13 —dijo Gwendolen riendo—. No soy muy buena calculando, pero me aventuraría a decir que debe hacer unas tres semanas.

Pequeña pausa, y luego él dijo:

—Eso es una gran pérdida de tiempo.

—¿Que le ha causado el conocerme? Le ruego no sea tan poco halagüeño. No lo soporto.

Pausa de nuevo.

—Es a causa de la ganancia, que siento la pérdida.

Esta vez fue Gwendolen la que hizo una pausa. Estaba pensando: «Realmente es muy ingenioso. Nunca habla de forma estúpida». Su silencio era tan insólito que parecía la más atrevida de las respuestas favorables, y él continuó:

—La ganancia de conocerla me hace sentir el tiempo que he perdido en la incertidumbre. ¿Le gusta a usted la incertidumbre?

—Creo que sí, más bien —dijo Gwendolen, regalándole de repente una sonrisa traviesa—. Hay más en ello.

Grandcourt dirigió a sus ojos sonrientes una mirada fija y penetrante, que parecía una mirada al vacío, y dijo:

—¿Se refiere a más tormento para mí?

Hubo algo tan extraño para Gwendolen en este momento que fue desprovista totalmente de su consciencia habitual de sí misma. Enrojeciendo y apartando la vista, dijo:

—No, eso me haría infeliz.

Grandcourt habría seguido tras esta respuesta, pues el cambio en sus maneras presagiaba que ella tenía una intención favorable; pero él no estaba tan absorto como para no darse cuenta que estaba, ahora, a la vista de todos, descendiendo la cuesta hacia la Enramada Verde, y descendiendo por un punto mal escogido en el que comenzaba a haber una escarpada bajada. Ello fue una razón para que él le ofreciera su mano en sentido literal para ayudarla; ella la cogió, y descendieron en silencio, observados con atención por los que ya se hallaban a nivel —entre otros la señora Arrowpoint, que resultaba estar al lado de la señora Davilow—. Esa dama había ya decidido que los méritos de Grandcourt no eran tales como para que hubieran inducido a su hija Catherine a aceptarlo, más cuando el listón que había dejado Catherine al haber rechazado a Lord Slogan estaba tan alto. Por eso, miró al inquilino de Diplow con ojos desapasionados.

—El señor Grandcourt, como hombre, no es como su tío, Sir Hugo Mallinger, demasiado lánguido. Es cierto que el señor Grandcourt es mucho más joven, pero no me extrañaría que Sir Hugo le sobreviviera, a pesar de la diferencia de edad. Es inútil hacer cálculos con las sucesiones —concluyó la señora Arrowpoint, en voz bastante alta.

—Sí que lo es —dijo la señora Davilow, que fue capaz de asentir con bastante alegría, pues estaba tan satisfecha con la situación actual de los acontecimientos que su melancolía habitual por su insatisfacción general no era reconocible.

No me preocupa no contar lo que se comió en ese merendero campestre, ni tampoco no detenerme ante la maravilla del paisaje del bosque que se extendía más allá del primer valle, al hallarme ante la obligación de narrar una historia de vida, en un momento en el que la belleza placentera del cielo y de la tierra se colaban únicamente de forma discreta y oblicua por la consciencia, que se hallaba ocupada con un pequeño drama social, en el que

las relaciones no eran más amplias de lo que habrían sido si se hubiera tratado de un teatro de marionetas. Se entenderá que la comida y el *champagne* eran de los mejores, así como la conversación y la diversión, pues pertenecían a lo mejor de la sociedad, donde nadie destaca de forma individual en nada en particular, y las comodidades del mundo se miran con ese sentimiento de devaluación típico de las clases superiores como consecuencia de estar tan acostumbradas a ellas. Algunos de los caballeros pasearon un poco y se complacieron con un puro, al disponer de bastante tiempo hasta las cuatro de la tarde, la hora prevista para deambular de nuevo. Entre estos, por extraño que parezca, se hallaba Grandcourt; pero no el señor Lush, que parecía que hoy se deleitaba generosamente siendo particularmente servicial, disponiéndolo todo para todo el mundo, lo cual resultaba para Gwendolen más repulsivo que nunca, a pesar de que se mantuvo amablemente apartado de ella, sin ni siquiera dirigirle conscientemente la mirada. Cuando hubo un movimiento general para prepararse para empezar, resultó que los arcos se habían dejado bajo el cuidado del ayudante de cámara de Lord Brackenshaw, y el señor Lush se preocupó de ahorrar a las damas la molestia de ir a por los suyos al carruaje donde estaban guardados. No pretendía traer el de Gwendolen, pero ella, para que no lo hiciera, se apresuró a ir a por el suyo. Al verla acercarse, el ayudante de cámara fue a su encuentro y entregándole el arco le dio también una carta dirigida a ella. No preguntó nada sobre la misma, se percató con un vistazo que la dirección estaba escrita con la letra de una señora (del tipo delicado que solía estimarse femenino antes del presente periodo uncial[61]), y apartándose con su arco en la mano, vio al señor Lush venir a por los demás arcos. Para evitar toparse con él se apartó a un lado y caminó de espaldas al conjunto de carruajes, abriendo la carta. Contenía estas palabras:

> Si la señorita Harleth vacila sobre si debe aceptar al señor Grandcourt, que se separe de su grupo cuando hayan pasado las Piedras Susurrantes y que vuelva a ese lugar. Oirá entonces algo que la hará decidirse, pero solo puede oírlo si mantiene esta carta en estricto secreto. Si no actúa según esta carta, se arrepentirá, como lo ha hecho la mujer que la ha escrito. El honor de la señorita Harleth la obligará a mantener el secreto.

Gwendolen sintió un sobresalto interior, pero enseguida pensó: «Ha llegado a tiempo». Por su juventud, estaba absorta por la idea de descubrir la revelación, y no se le ocurrió ni por un instante enseñar a nadie la carta. Inmediatamente resolvió que se las arreglaría para pasar desapercibida ante las Piedras Susurrantes; y guardando la carta en su bolsillo regresó para unirse

con el grupo, con ese sentimiento de tener algo que ocultar, lo cual fortificaba su naturaleza y la ayudaba a sentirse dueña de sí misma.

Fue una sorpresa para todo el mundo que Grandcourt no estuviera, como el resto de los fumadores, en el lugar a tiempo para partir con el resto.

—Iremos parando para ver si le vemos —dijo Lord Brackenshaw—; no puede haber ido muy lejos. —En cualquier caso, no podían esperar a nadie. Este aparente olvido podría considerarse como la distracción de un amante tan absorto en pensar en su objeto amado como para olvidar la cita que la conduciría hasta su misma presencia. Y el cariñoso Conde insinuó a Gwendolen una broma distante en esa dirección, que ella aceptó con serena tranquilidad. Pero lo que pensó para sí fue: «¿Puede que también él se aparte de su decisión?». No era un pensamiento agradable; pero era cercano a la verdad. «Apartarse», sin embargo, no era la expresión adecuada para definir el estado de languidez que le sobrevino a Grandcourt, como un ataque de entumecimiento doliente, cuando parecía que era fácil alcanzar el objetivo: desistir entonces, cuando se esperaba precisamente lo contrario, era una gratificación caprichosa, sublimemente independiente de cualquier motivo fijo. En ese momento había empezado otro segundo largo puro, con una terquedad tan distraída e indefinida que, si Lush o cualquier otro mortal que pudiera ser insultado con impunidad le hubiera alcanzado pidiéndole que volviera, se habría expresado retirando lentamente el puro de su boca y diciendo en voz baja: «¿Serías tan amable de irte al cuerno?».

Pero no fue interrumpido, y los arqueros ambulantes partieron sin ningún signo visible de abatimiento, dejando atrás solamente a algunas de las señoras menos fuertes, incluyendo a la señora Davilow, que prefería un paseo tranquilo libre de la obligación de mantenerse junto al resto. Era el momento del día en que más estaban disfrutando, los arqueros estaban cada vez más animados y las escenas variables del bosque cambiaban de frondosos boscajes a espacios abiertos que ganaban en hermosura al alargarse las sombras; todos sentían profundamente las indefinidas gradaciones de las luces del atardecer. Estuvieron de acuerdo en que estaban representando un «*A vuestro gusto*»[62] improvisado; y cuando se halagó amablemente a Gwendolen diciéndole que ella actuaba de Rosalinda, se sintió aún más obligada a mostrar toda su vivacidad. Esto no era muy difícil para ella, puesto que el efecto de lo que había pasado ese día era una emoción que necesitaba su desahogo, una sensación de aventura más que de alarma, y un motivo para poder retirarse sin que se lo impidieran.

Llevaban ya casi una hora de paseo antes de que llegaran a las Piedras Susurrantes, dos grandes bloques en forma cónica que se inclinaban el uno sobre el otro como dos gigantes vestidos de gris. Pronto las reconocieron y pasaron por ellas comentando que serían unos buenos fantasmas en una noche estrellada. Pero sobre ellos caía por ahora una tenue luz, y Gwendolen se sentía atrevida. Las piedras estaban cerca de un hermoso boscaje de hayas donde los arqueros hallaron muchísimas señales.

—¿A cuánto estamos ahora de la Enramada Verde? —dijo Gwendolen, situándose a la cabeza por el lado del guardián.

—Oh, a no más de media milla; tomando recta la arboleda saldríamos a parar allí, pero daremos un rodeo de un par de millas, por la Cruz Alta.

Ella se iba separando del resto, cuando de repente todos parecieron cambiar de rumbo apresuradamente hacia uno de los laterales bajo la guía del señor Lush, así que demorándose un poco, vio que era su oportunidad de escabullirse. Pronto estuvo fuera de vista, y sin estar corriendo, le parecía que volaba sobre el suelo y no pasaron ni unos instantes cuando ya se encontraba de nuevo en las Piedras Susurrantes. Sus caras huecas y grises estaban vueltas hacia ella: ¿qué habría allí por el otro lado? ¿Y si no hubiera nada después de todo? Ese era su único temor: tener que volver de nuevo confundida; y rodeando la piedra derecha sin pararse, se encontró enfrente de alguien cuyos grandes ojos oscuros se toparon con los de ella a un pie de distancia. A pesar de esperárselo, se asustó y retrocedió, pero al hacerlo pudo ver toda la figura de esta extraña y darse cuenta que inconfundiblemente era una señora, y una que debía haber sido en sobremanera hermosa. Observó también, que a unas pocas yardas de ella había dos niños sentados sobre la hierba.

—¿Señorita Harleth? —dijo la señora.

—Sí —Gwendolen se hallaba asombrada.

—¿Ha aceptado usted al señor Grandcourt?

—No.

—He prometido decirle algo. Y usted prometerá mantener mi secreto. Decida lo que decida, ¿no dirá usted al señor Grandcourt ni a nadie más que me ha visto?

—Lo prometo.

—Me llamo Lydia Glasher. El señor Grandcourt no debería casarse con nadie excepto conmigo. Yo dejé a mi marido y a mi niño por él hace nueve años. Esos dos niños son suyos, y tenemos dos más, niñas, que son mayores.

Mi marido está muerto ahora, el señor Grandcourt debería casarse conmigo. Tendría que hacer a ese niño su heredero.

Ella miró al niño mientras hablaba, y los ojos de Gwendolen siguieron los suyos. El pequeño y hermoso mozuelo llenaba sus mejillas intentado hacer sonar una pequeña trompeta que permanecía muda. Su sombrero colgaba por detrás con una cuerda y sus rizos oscuros reflejaban los rayos del sol. Era un querubín.

Los ojos de las dos mujeres se encontraron de nuevo, y Gwendolen dijo orgullosamente:

—No interferiré con sus deseos. —Parecía que estuviera temblando, y sus labios estaban pálidos.

—Es usted muy atractiva, señorita Harleth. Pero cuando él me conoció por primera vez, también yo era joven. Desde entonces, mi vida ha estado destrozada y amargada. No es justo que él sea feliz y yo miserable, y que mi niño sea desplazado por otro.

Pronunció estas palabras en un tono mordaz, aunque rotundamente desprovistas de cualquier signo de violencia. Gwendolen, observando el rostro de la señora Glasher mientras hablaba, sintió una especie de terror: era como si una visión fantasmal se le hubiera presentado en sueños y dijera: «Soy la vida de una mujer».

—¿Tiene usted algo más que decirme? —preguntó en voz baja, aunque de forma orgullosa y fría. La repulsión que sentía en su interior no la ayudaba a ablandarla. Todo el mundo le parecía odioso.

—Nada. Ya sabe todo lo que quería que supiera. Puede hacer averiguaciones sobre mí si lo desea. Mi marido era el coronel Glasher.

—Entonces me iré —dijo Gwendolen, apartándose con una inclinación ceremoniosa, que le fue devuelta con igual gracia.

En pocos minutos Gwendolen se hallaba de nuevo en el boscaje de hayas, pero su grupo se había alejado hasta estar fuera de vista y aparentemente no la estaban buscando, pues todo estaba solitario hasta que alcanzó la arboleda señalada por el guardián. Decidió tomar este camino para volver a la Arboleda Verde, a la que llegó rápidamente; ir caminando sin parar le parecía la forma más adecuada de apartar los pensamientos que le impedirían comportarse con la debida calma. Ya había decidido qué paso iba a tomar.

Por supuesto, la señora Davilow se sorprendió de que Gwendolen regresara sola, y no tenía sino una ansiedad que la presencia de otras señoras

le impedían exteriorizar. Respondiendo a sus palabras de asombro Gwendolen dijo:

—¡Oh, qué tonta soy! Me retrasé mirando las Piedras Susurrantes, y el resto se adelantó un poco, así que los perdí de vista. Pensé volver a casa por el camino corto, la arboleda que me había indicado el guardián. No me sabe mal. Ya había tenido suficiente paseo.

—Tu grupo no se encontró con el señor Grandcourt, supongo —dijo la señora Arrowpoint, no sin intención.

—No —dijo Gwendolen, con un ligero destello de desafío y riendo un poco—. Y tampoco vimos entalladuras en los árboles. ¿Dónde puede estar? Igual se ha caído en el estanque o le ha dado un ataque de apoplejía.

A pesar de todo el esfuerzo de Gwendolen por no descubrir su agitación, no pudo evitar que su tono fuera insólitamente alto y duro, y su madre estuvo segura de que había ocurrido algo desfavorable.

La señora Arrowpoint pensó que la señorita que estaba siempre tan segura de sí misma se hallaba muy indignada, y que el señor Grandcourt estaba probablemente dándose cuenta de que tenía que cambiar de opinión.

—Si no tienes nada que objetar, mamá, pediré el carruaje —dijo Gwendolen—. Estoy cansada. Y los demás llegarán pronto.

La señora Davilow asintió; pero para cuando se anunció que el carruaje estaba listo —había que haber ido a buscar los caballos a los establos según las indicaciones del guardián—, reapareció el grupo ambulante, y con ellos el señor Grandcourt.

—¡Ah, estás aquí! —dijo Lord Brackenshaw, dirigiéndose a Gwendolen, que estaba preparando el mantón de su mamá para el viaje—. Al principio pensamos que te habías topado con Grandcourt y que él te había llevado a casa. Eso dijo Lush. Pero después nos encontramos a Grandcourt. De todas formas, no pensamos que pudieras estar en peligro. El guardián dijo que te había enseñado un modo de volver más rápido.

—¿Se van? —dijo Grandcourt, acercándose en su forma habitual, como si no se diera cuenta de que había estado ausente. Lord Brackenshaw le hizo sitió y se retiró.

—Sí, nos vamos —dijo Gwendolen, mirándose entretenida la bufanda que se estaba colocando alrededor de los hombros. Moda escocesa.

—¿Puedo llamar mañana a Offendene?

—Oh, sí, como quiera —dijo Gwendolen, con un movimiento de sus pestañas que consiguió el efecto de parecer que le observaba desde la

distancia. Su voz era ligera y nítida como las primeras gotas de escarcha.

La señora Davilow aceptó su brazo para subirla al carruaje; pero mientras esto sucedía, Gwendolen, con increíble velocidad, pasó por delante de ellos y saltó al carruaje.

—He entrado, mamá, porque deseaba estar sentada a este lado —dijo, disculpándose. Pero había evitado el contacto con Grandcourt: él solo levantó su sombrero y dio media vuelta, con la impresión no desagradable de que ella quería mostrarse ofendida por haber estado él ausente.

Madre e hija estuvieron los primeros cinco minutos del trayecto en silencio. Luego Gwendolen dijo:

—Pretendo unirme a los Langen en Dover, mamá. Recogeré mis cosas inmediatamente al llegar a casa, y partiré temprano con el primer tren. Estaré en Dover casi tan pronto como ellos; se lo podemos hacer saber por telégrafo.

—¡Santo cielo, niña! ¿Cuál puede ser tu razón para que digas esto?

—Mi razón para decirlo, mamá, es que pienso hacerlo.

—¿Pero por qué quieres hacerlo?

—Deseo marcharme.

—¿Es por qué estás ofendida con el extraño comportamiento del señor Grandcourt por haber estado caminando solo todo el día?

—Es inútil entrar en estas cuestiones. No voy a casarme en cualquier caso con el señor Grandcourt. No te intereses más en él.

—¿Qué voy a decir a tu tío, Gwendolen? Piensa en la posición en la que me dejas. Le hiciste creer justo anoche que te habías decidido a favor del señor Grandcourt.

—Me sabe muy mal causarte problemas, querida mamá, pero no puedo evitarlo —dijo Gwendolen, todavía con dura resistencia en su tono—. Sea lo que sea lo que tú o mi tío penséis o hagáis, no conseguiréis que cambie de opinión, y no voy a decir mis motivos. No me importa lo que se desprenda de ello. No me importa si nunca me caso. No vale la pena preocuparse por nada. Creo que todos los hombres son malos, y los odio.

—¿Pero necesitas partir de esta manera? —dijo la señora Davilow, triste e impotente.

—Por favor, mamá, no te metas en esto. Si has tenido algún problema en tu propia vida, recuérdalo, y no te metas en esto. Si tengo que ser miserable, déjame serlo por mi propia decisión.

La madre se retrajo a un silencio tembloroso. Comenzaba a darse cuenta que las dificultades se reducirían si Gwendolen se marchaba.

Y se marchó. Recogió sus cosas con esmero esa noche, y poco después del amanecer del siguiente día la señora Davilow acompañó a su hija a la estación de tren. El dulce rocío de la mañana, las vacas y los caballos mirando a través de las cercas sin un motivo particular, los viajeros madrugadores que deambulaban con sus paquetes, les parecieron a ambas que todo era muy melancólico y sin sentido. El estupor sórdido de la estación, antes de que pudieran retirar el *ticket* era todavía peor. Gwendolen ciertamente se había endurecido en las últimas veinticuatro horas: era evidente que el problema de su madre contaba poco para ella en su actual estado de ánimo, que esencialmente no difería mucho del estado que hace que los hombres se comporten como peor pueden cuando su confianza en las personas o en las cosas es defraudada. Las lecturas no censuradas de Gwendolen, aunque consistían principalmente en lo que denominamos imágenes de la vida, no le habían preparado de alguna manera para este encuentro con la realidad. ¿Es sorprendente? Hay que tener en cuenta que los hombres no se quedarían tan indiferentes cuando asisten a la ópera bufa hoy en día si las situaciones allí aplaudidas fueran a ocurrir de repente en sus propias familias. La perspectiva, como remarcó su inventor, es algo hermoso. Los horrores de las húmedas chozas, donde languidecen seres humanos, se vuelven pintorescos desde la distancia aérea. Cantamos himnos a vicios cancerosos como arte sublime en la segura distancia de una lengua extraña y una frase artificial. Sin embargo, nos repugna el reumatismo y otros efectos penosos cuando se nos presentan en nuestra experiencia personal.

A la señora Davilow le dolió la nueva fase de indiferencia de Gwendolen, y mientras volvía a casa sola, la soleada mañana le parecía más triste que antes.

El señor Grandcourt llamó ese día a Offendene, pero no había nadie en casa.

Capítulo 15

Festina lente[63], la rapidez debería ser equilibrada con la demora.

SIR THOMAS BROWNE

GWENDOLEN, YA HEMOS VISTO, PASÓ SU TIEMPO EN EL EXTRANJERO CON LA NUEVA excitación del juego, y viéndose a sí misma como una emperatriz de la fortuna, al haberse llevado de su última experiencia una vaga impresión de que en este mundo confuso no significaba nada lo que uno hiciera, mientras se divirtiera. También hemos visto, que ciertas personas, misteriosamente aparecidas como Grapnell y Cia., habiendo pensado a su vez distinguirse en el reinado de la fortuna, y estar asimismo inclinados a divertirse de cualquier manera, habían acarreado un doloroso cambio en sus circunstancias familiares; después de lo cual, ella volvió a casa, llevando consigo, en contra de su voluntad, un collar que había empeñado y que alguien más había rescatado.

Mientras ella regresaba a Inglaterra, Grandcourt estaba viniendo para encontrarla; viniendo, hay que decir, a su manera, no apresuradamente por medio de un Express directo de Diplow a Leubronn, donde se suponía que ella se encontraba, sino sin prisa alguna, tanto es así que la presencia de algunos conocidos rusos le indujeron a detenerse en Baden-Baden y concertar con ellos varias citas, que, sin embargo, finalmente fueron canceladas por su deseo de seguir en Leubronn. Los sentimientos de Grandcourt eran de naturaleza intermitente y vacilante: nunca los exteriorizaba demasiado. Pero una gran parte de la vida transcurre sin exteriorizar los sentimientos: se atan millones de nudos de pañuelos de cuello, se atienden comidas, incluso se realizan discursos ensalzando a personajes augustos, sin que se levante el menor entusiasmo. Y un hombre puede causar una buena impresión en la alta sociedad —hacer creer que conoce a los clásicos, que desconfía de la ciencia, que tiene una opinión profunda aunque discreta sobre la política, y que posee todos los sentimientos del caballero inglés—, sin que le cueste mucho trabajo. También puede ser testarudo o persistente en niveles más bajos, e incluso puede mostrar impulsos repentinos con una falsa apariencia de fuerza demoníaca al aparecer como inexplicables, aunque quizás su secreto resida

simplemente en desarrollar ciertos mecanismos que posee el alma para desfogarse —una costumbre buena y eficiente, sin la cual nuestra naturaleza no sería más que cieno y barro, los cuales al presionarlos no producen más que un borbotón o un pequeño charco—.

Grandcourt no se había disgustado del todo por que Gwendolen escapara de la maravillosa oportunidad que él le ofrecía. Esa conducta tenía algo de agradable. Le gustaba pensar que era debida al resentimiento por su comportamiento negligente en Cardell Chase, que cuando se paró a pensarlo, parecía más bien distante. Haberla conducido hasta una tierna admisión tan cercana, y luego haberse alejado precipitadamente sin darle la oportunidad de ganarse el consentimiento que él la había dado a entender que le pedía, era suficiente para provocar a una chica con carácter; y para merecer su consentimiento era conveniente que ella tuviera cierto carácter. Sin lugar a duda, ella pretendía que él la siguiera, y era lo que también él pretendía. Pero durante una semana, no tomó ninguna medida para partir, y ni siquiera intentó averiguar adónde había ido la señorita Harleth. El señor Lush sintió un triunfo que, sin embargo, estaba empañado con bastante desconfianza; pues Grandcourt no le había dicho una sola palabra sobre ella, y parecía tan neutral como un cocodrilo: no había forma de saber qué podía esperarse de su mente tan lentamente mudable. Con todo, haber retrasado la decisión había dejado espacio para gastar parte de las energías de Grandcourt.

Los invitados de Diplow mostraron más curiosidad que su anfitrión. ¿Cómo es que no se sabía nada de la señorita Harleth? ¿Era creíble que hubiera rechazado a Grandcourt? Lady Flora Hollis, una animada mujer de mediana edad, bien provista de curiosidad, tuvo un repentino interés en hacer una ronda de visitas con la señora Torrington, incluyendo la Rectoría, Offendene, y Quetcham, y de esta forma no solo obtuvo la información por varias fuentes, sino que además, pudo hablar de ello con los Arrowpoint, a saber, que la señorita Harleth se había ido a Leubronn con unos antiguos amigos, el Barón y la Baronesa von Langen; y es que tras la inmediata conmoción y la decepción de la señora Davilow y de los Gascoigne, estos habían resuelto que la desaparición de Gwendolen no fuera interpretada como algo excéntrico o que tuviera que ser mantenido en secreto. En su interior, todavía, el Rector concebía la posibilidad de que el matrimonio solo se retrasara un poco, pues la señora Davilow no se había atrevido a contarle la fuerte determinación con la que Gwendolen le había hablado. Y a pesar de su talento pragmático, algo de su experiencia había quedado petrificado en

máximas y citas. Cuando Amaryllis[64] huía quería que se conociera su escondite; y en esta época del vapor, podía decirse sin hipérbole que el amor encuentra el camino «sobre mares y montañas». Gwendolen, pensaba, era una Amaryllis de excelente sentido, pero osadamente coqueta; la cuestión era, si ella se había pasado.

Lady Flora, al regresar cargada de noticias sobre la señorita Harleth, no vio ninguna razón para no sorprender al señor Grandcourt mencionándoselas en la mesa; y al hacerlo dejó escapar alguna insinuación de que había oído por ahí que él era un pretendiente decepcionado. Grandcourt escuchó con gran calma, pero con atención; y al día siguiente, ordenó a Lush que encontrara un motivo decente para despedir a sus invitados de Diplow hacia el final de la siguiente semana, pues pretendía ir en yate al mar Báltico o algún otro sitio, al resultarle imposible seguir en Diplow como si fuera un preso en libertad condicional, con un grupo de gente a la que nunca había querido. Lush no necesitó un anunció más claro de que Grandcourt iba a ir a Leubronn; pero iba a ir arrastrándose como una bola de billar. Así que el señor Lush quiso hacerse indispensable para también ir con él, cosa que logró; la repulsión que Gwendolen sentía por él era algo que divertía a su patrón, lo cual favorecía que este deseara tener a Lush siempre a mano.

Así es como sucedió que Grandcourt llegara al *Czarina* al quinto día que Gwendolen hubo salido de Leubronn, y encontró allí a su tío, Sir Hugo Mallinger, con su familia, incluido Deronda. No es necesariamente agradable ni para el que ostenta el poder ni para el presunto heredero que los asuntos propios de cada uno —digamos, un ataque de gota en un caso, y un ataque de terquedad en el otro—, les lleven a un mismo lugar. Sir Hugo era un hombre de carácter tranquilo, tolerante con las diferencias y los defectos; pero un punto de vista distinto al suyo en lo que se refería a la distribución de las haciendas familiares le irritaba más que discutir sobre la disciplina de la Iglesia o las votaciones políticas, y consideraba esas faltas tanto más graves cuanto que pertenecían a una persona que le resultaba del todo inoportuna. En ninguna circunstancia podía haber aceptado a Grandcourt como a su sobrino; pero como presunto heredero de las haciendas de Mallinger era el signo y la encarnación de una gran atribulación en la vida del baronet. Este quería un hijo que heredera las tierras, nada le preocupaba más. Pues en la descuidada distribución que su padre, Sir Francis, había decidido dejar en herencia, incluso Diplow con sus pequeñas tierras habían sido dejadas bajo las mismas condiciones que el antiguo y amplio patrimonio de las dos zonas altas, donde

Sir Hugo había vivido y cazado durante muchas estaciones en sus años de juventud, y donde su mujer y sus hijas deberían poder retirarse tras su muerte.

La preocupación había ido naturalmente en aumento a medida que pasaban los años, y Lady Mallinger, después de tener tres hijas en rápida sucesión, había estado ocho años hasta ahora que pasaba los cuarenta sin dar a la luz más que a otra hija; mientras que Sir Hugo, casi veinte años mayor, estaba en una etapa de la vida en la que, a pesar de la moda imperante en la que todo se retrasaba, desde las comidas hasta las bodas, el optimismo de un hombre empieza a mostrar signos de cansancio, hasta que es restaurado por la segunda infancia.

De hecho, había empezado a desesperarse por no conseguir un hijo, y la confirmación del interés de Grandcourt por la hacienda le había hecho aborrecer su imagen y su presencia; pero, por otra parte, había circunstancias que obligaban a Sir Hugo a procurar que la relación entre ellos fuera lo más amigable posible. Ello le llevó a seguir un plan que había ido formándose a medida que crecía su decepción por no tener un heredero, a saber, intentar asegurar Diplow como futura residencia para Lady Mallinger y sus hijas, y conservar esta bella porción de tierra del patrimonio familiar para su propia descendencia a pesar de no tener heredero. El conocimiento que tenía de la determinación y de los asuntos de su sobrino le animaron a creer que Grandcourt consentiría en una transacción por la que obtendría una fuerte suma de dinero al contado, como un equivalente de su anticipado interés por los dominios de Diplow y por la moderada cantidad de tierra sujeta a ellos. Si, después de todo, el inesperado hijo nacía, el dinero habría sido tirado, y Grandcourt habría recibido el dinero solo para asegurar algo que iban a tener seguro; pero Sir Hugo, creyó que apenas había ya riesgo, y en sus últimos años de matrimonio había manejado bien su fortuna gracias al trabajo en la minas y al arrendamiento de sus tierras, de forma que estaba preparado para un fuerte desembolso.

Es por esto que tuvo buen cuidado en evitar cualquier litigio con Grandcourt. Unos años antes, en la época en la que estaba haciendo unas mejoras para la Abadía y necesitaba el acuerdo de Grandcourt para talar cierta cantidad de madera de su territorio, se felicitó de no haber encontrado que su peculiar sobrino le guardara ningún rencor; y desde entonces no había ocurrido nada que les hiciera detestarse más de lo que fuera compatible con una perfecta cortesía, o con una estricta tolerancia mutua.

Grandcourt, por su parte, consideraba a su tío una persona superficial y aburrida, y pensaba que se mejorarían una larga serie de cosas cuando Sir Hugo desapareciera. Pero había sido advertido por Lush, un mediador siempre tan útil, de las intenciones del baronet referentes a Diplow, y le satisfacía tener la alternativa del dinero en mente: incluso si no hubiera pensado en aceptarlo, habría quedado satisfecho al sentir el poder de rechazar lo que Sir Hugo deseaba. La transacción sugerida había sido uno de los motivos que le hicieron pedir un año de arrendamiento de Diplow, cosa que a Sir Hugo le había costado conceder, ya que la excelente caza de la zona podía hacer decidir a Grandcourt no abandonar Diplow sin asegurarse su posesión futura; un hombre que tiene dos lugares, en uno de los cuales la caza es menos buena, naturalmente desea un tercero donde sea mejor. Además, Lush había dejado caer a Sir Hugo la posibilidad de que Grandcourt cortejara y consiguiera a la señorita Arrowpoint, y en ese caso, el dinero al contado podía no tentarle tanto. Así que, ante este encuentro inesperado en Leubronn, el baronet tenía mucha curiosidad por saber cómo habían ido las cosas por Diplow, estaba dispuesto a mostrarse tan cortés como fuera posible con su sobrino, y esperaba tener alguna charla privada con Lush.

Entre Deronda y Grandcourt existía una relación algo más marcada aunque también más peculiar, debido a unas circunstancias que aún están por conocerse. Pero ninguno de los dos mostró ningún signo de desgana reprimida en su primer encuentro en la mesa del hotel, una hora después de la llegada de Grandcourt; y cuando el cuarteto de caballeros se encontró después en la terraza, sin Lady Mallinger, se alejaron juntos paseando hacia las habitaciones, y Sir Hugo dijo al entrar en la amplia sala de estar:

—¿Jugaste mucho en Baden, Grandcourt?

—No, estuve observando y aposté un poco con algunos rusos.

—¿Tuviste suerte?

—¿Qué es lo que gané, Lush?

—Se llevó unos doscientos —dijo Lush.

—¿No estás aquí por el juego, entonces? —dijo Sir Hugo.

—No, no me interesa el juego por ahora. Cuesta demasiado esfuerzo —dijo Grandcourt, cuyo porte y el anillo de diamantes que llevaba, mientras se paseaba alisándose el bigote, llamaban la atención de las maquilladas extranjeras interesadas en un nuevo milord.

—Alguien tendría que inventar un producto que te fuera procurando diversiones, querido compañero —dijo Sir Hugo—, como hacen los tártaros

con sus papeletas[65]. Pero estoy de acuerdo contigo, a mí nunca me interesó el juego. Es monótono y atonta el cerebro. Me molesta hasta observarlo. Supongo que a uno le envenena el ambiente. Nunca estoy aquí más de diez minutos. ¿Pero dónde está tu belleza a la que le encanta apostar, Deronda? ¿La has visto últimamente?

—Se ha ido —dijo Deronda secamente.

—Una chica preciosa fuera de lo común, una perfecta Diana —dijo Sir Hugo, volviéndose de nuevo hacia Grandcourt—. Vale la pena intentar verla. La vi ganando, y se lo tomó tan fríamente como si lo hubiera sabido de antemano. El mismo día Deronda la vio perder sin parar, y lo soportó con inmenso coraje. Supongo que se quedó sin blanca, o tal vez fuera lo suficientemente astuta para detenerse a tiempo. ¿Cómo sabes que se ha ido?

—Oh, por la lista de visitantes —dijo Deronda encogiendo casi imperceptiblemente los hombros—. Vandernoodt me dijo que su nombre era Harleth, y estaba con el Barón y la Baronessa von Langen. Vi por la lista que la señorita Harleth ya no estaba allí.

Esto no añadió más información para Lush que el saber que Gwendolen había estado apostando. Él ya había mirado la lista, y había averiguado que Gwendolen se había ido, pero no tenía intención de compartir este conocimiento con Grandcourt hasta que este preguntara por ello; y no lo había preguntado, pensando que era suficiente creer que el objeto de su búsqueda aparecería por algún lugar u otro.

Pero ahora Grandcourt lo había oído todo, incluso lo que era más bien inoportuno, y no se perdió ni una palabra sobre lo que se dijo de la señorita Harleth. Tras una breve pausa, dijo a Deronda:

—¿Conoces a esa gente, a los Langen?

—He hablado un poco con ellos desde que la señorita Harleth se fue. No sabía nada de ellos antes.

—¿Dónde ha ido? ¿Lo sabes?

—Ha ido a casa —dijo Deronda, fríamente, como si no deseara añadir nada más. Pero entonces, con renovado brío, volvió la mirada fijamente hacia Grandcourt y dijo—: Pero es probable que la conozcas. Su casa no está lejos de Diplow: Offendene, cerca de Wancester.

Deronda, al volverse para mirar cara a cara a Grandcourt que estaba a su derecha, podía haber sido un modelo excelente para esos viejos pintores a los que les gustaba contrastar caracteres. Su rostro reflejaba una tranquila intensidad llena de vida y una riqueza de matices tales, que una repentina

mirada suya siempre sorprendía, y a menudo parecía que hubiera dicho algo, de modo que los oficiales y los sirvientes le preguntaban automáticamente: «¿Qué ha dicho, señor?» cuando en realidad no había dicho nada. El mismo Grandcourt se irritó, aunque no dejó traslucir su emoción a excepción de un ligero movimiento de sus párpados, al volverse Deronda hacia él, pues habría sido suficiente con que solo hablase. Pero le respondió, con su habitual lentitud:

—Sí, la conozco, —y apartó la mirada de Deronda para fijarla en el juego.

—¿Qué sabéis de ella? —le preguntó Sir Hugo a Lush avanzándose un poco—. Debe ser nueva en Offendene. Blenny vivía allí después de morir la matrona.

—Demasiado sabemos de ella —dijo Lush, en voz baja y confidencial; no le importaba que Sir Hugo conociera el estado de las cosas.

—¿Por qué? ¿Cómo? —dijo el baronet. Todos se trasladaron del salón hacia fuera, donde podían continuar el paseo al aire libre.

—Ha estado a punto de casarse con ella —prosiguió Lush—. Pero espero que todo se haya acabado ya. Es la sobrina de un clérigo, Gascoigne, en Pennicote. Su madre es una viuda con una tropa de hijas. Esta chica no tendrá nada, y es peligrosa como la pólvora. Sería un matrimonio estúpido. Pero ella ha cambiado repentinamente de opinión, pues escapó hacia aquí sin avisar, cuando él acordó visitarla al día siguiente. El hecho es que él está aquí tras ella; pero él no ha tenido mucha prisa, y gracias al comportamiento de ambos es bastante probable que no vuelvan a coincidir de nuevo. Pero por supuesto él ha perdido su oportunidad con la heredera.

Grandcourt se unió a ellos y dijo:

—¡Menudo cuchitril es este! Es peor que Baden. Me vuelvo al hotel.

Cuando Sir Hugo y Deronda quedaron solos, el baronet empezó diciendo:

—Una bella historia. La chica tiene algo de dramático. Debe valer la pena correr tras ella. Tendrá algo *de l'imprévu*[66]. Creo que su aparición en escena ha mejorado mi oportunidad de conseguir Diplow, tanto si el matrimonio se lleva a cabo como si no.

—Espero que un matrimonio de esas características no se lleve a cabo —dijo Deronda, en tono de aversión.

—¿Qué? ¿Has sentido también tú el flechazo? —dijo Sir Hugo, subiéndose las gafas para observar mejor (era de corta visión) a su compañero —. ¿Estás decidido a correr tras ella?

—Al contrario —dijo Deronda—, me siento más bien decidido a escapar de ella.

—¿Cómo? Desplazarías sin problemas a Grandcourt. Una chica de su carácter te tomaría a ti por el mejor pretendiente de entre los dos —dijo Sir Hugo, que a menudo probaba la paciencia de Deronda al bromear cuando no podía dar consejo. (Una diferencia en los gustos de las bromas hace muy difícil salvar la barrera de los afectos).

—Supongo que la genealogía y las tierras pertenecen al mejor pretendiente —dijo Deronda fríamente.

—El mejor caballo gana la carrera y no el que tenga mejores antepasados, hijo. Recuerda las palabras de Napoleón: «*Je suis ancêtre*»[67] —dijo Sir Hugo, que normalmente infravaloraba el tener ascendientes de alta cuna, pues los hombres, tras comer bien, solían estar de acuerdo en que lo bueno de la vida está distribuido con maravillosa igualdad.

—No estoy seguro de que quiera ser un ancestro —dijo Deronda—. No me parece una buena forma de empezar.

—¿No correrás tras la hermosa jugadora, entonces? —dijo Sir Hugo, sacándose las gafas.

—Decididamente no.

La respuesta era totalmente cierta; sin embargo, por la mente de Deronda cruzó el pensamiento de que bajo otras circunstancias podía haber sucumbido al interés que la chica había despertado en él, e intentar saber algo más de ella. Pero su historia se orientaba hacia otra dirección. No se sentía en absoluto libre.

Capítulo 16

> Los hombres, como los planetas, tienen ambos una historia visible y otra invisible. El astrónomo explora la oscuridad con estricta precisión, calculando cada arco visible en la órbita del observador; y el narrador de las acciones humanas, si hiciera su trabajo con la misma perfección, tendría que indagar por los ocultos caminos de los sentimientos y del pensamiento que conducen a cada una de las acciones, y a esos momentos de intenso sufrimiento que conforman la cualidad de la acción —como el grito de Prometeo—[68], cuya angustia encadenada parece liberar una energía superior a la del cielo y el mar al que invoca y a la misma deidad que desafía.

LAS CIRCUNSTANCIAS DE DERONDA HABÍAN SIDO, CIERTAMENTE, EXCEPCIONALES. Hubo un momento que quedó marcado en su vida como su etapa principal —un momento lleno de días soleados de julio y multitud de rosas rosadas extendiendo sus últimos pétalos en un jardín rodeado de hierba y encerrado por las tres alas de un claustro gótico—. Imaginadle en tal escena: un niño de trece años, estirado cómodamente sobre la hierba a la sombra, sosteniendo su cabeza encrespada con un brazo y leyendo un libro, mientras su tutor, que también leía, estaba sentado en un taburete bajo un cobertizo. El libro de Deronda era la Historia de las Repúblicas Italianas de Sismondi: el chico albergaba una pasión por la historia, ansiaba conocer en qué había sido empleado el tiempo desde la Inundación, y cómo se habían resuelto los problemas en las épocas más duras. De pronto, bajó el brazo izquierdo y miró a su tutor, diciendo en un tono netamente infantil:

—Señor Fraser, ¿cómo es que los papas y cardenales han tenido siempre tantos sobrinos?

El tutor, un capacitado joven escocés, que hacía de secretario de Sir Hugo Mallinger, dejó a un lado un poco de mala gana la política económica y le respondió con ese estilo enfático y bien definido propio de los escoceses que dejan claras las verdades:

—Sus propios hijos eran llamados sobrinos.

—¿Por qué? —preguntó Deronda.

—Simplemente para conservar el puesto; como bien sabes, los presbíteros no se casan, y los hijos eran ilegítimos.

El señor Fraser, vocalizando más aún sus últimas palabras para hacer patente su impaciencia por haber sido interrumpido, había vuelto ya su

atención hacia su libro de nuevo, mientras que Deronda, como si se le hubiera clavado algo, se enderezó y quedó sentado de espaldas a su tutor.

Siempre había llamado a Sir Hugo Mallinger su tío, y cuando una vez se le ocurrió preguntar por su padre y por su madre, el baronet le respondió: «Perdiste a tus padres cuando eras muy pequeño; por eso yo cuido de ti». Daniel, entonces, hizo un esfuerzo por rememorar sus primeros recuerdos, y tuvo una tenue sensación de haber sido besado mucho, y de haber sido envuelto en un ropaje fino, pardo y perfumado, hasta que sus dedos toparon con algo duro, que le hizo daño, y empezó a llorar. Cualquier otro recuerdo pertenecía ya al pequeño mundo donde vivía. Y en esa época no le importaba saber más, pues quería demasiado a Sir Hugo como para lamentar la pérdida de unos padres desconocidos. La vida le resultaba muy agradable al chico, con un tío que era siempre indulgente y alegre, un buen hombre en la brillante etapa del ecuador de la vida, a quien Daniel consideraba como absolutamente perfecto, y cuyo lugar de residencia era uno de los más lujosos de Inglaterra: histórico, romántico y confortable a la vez; un pintoresco y arquitectónico desarrollo a partir de una abadía, que todavía tenía reminiscencias del antiguo casco monástico. Diplow se hallaba en otro condado, y comparativamente era un lugar sin tierras que había ido a parar a la familia por un rico abogado por la rama femenina, que llevaba la peluca de tiempos de la Restauración[69]; mientras que a los Mallinger se les concedió el Monte del Monje bajo el reinado de Enrique VIII, y años antes habían obtenido las tierras colindantes al Monte del Rey, cuyo origen se remontaba a un tal Hugo el Enclenque, que vino con el Conquistador, y que tenía una complexión enfermiza, que se había ido corrigiendo felizmente en sus descendientes. Dos grupos de estos descendientes dispuestos en fila, directos y colaterales, mujeres por la rama masculina, y hombres por la rama femenina, observaban en la galería más allá de los claustros al sobrino Daniel mientras caminaba por allí; hombres armados con barbas puntiagudas y cejas arqueadas, mujeres embutidas en cinchos y gorgueras sin rostro para hablar; hombres de mirada grave vestidos en trajes de terciopelo negro con caderas henchidas, y mujeres serias y asustadas, dando la mano a pequeños chiquillos; políticos sonrientes con magníficas pelucas, y mujeres que parecían animales de concurso, con la boca y los párpados emperifollados, al estilo de Lely[70]; luego una generación de rostros maquillados al gusto de Kneller[71], y así seguían ediciones refinadas de la familia de tiempos de Reynolds y Romney[72], hasta terminar con Sir Hugo y su hermano menor Henleigh. Este último se había casado con la

señorita Grandcourt, y había tomado su nombre junto con su hacienda, fusionando así dos familias igualmente antiguas, uniendo las tres cabezas de sarracenos y la moneda bizantina de la una, con la torre y los halcones de plata de la otra[73], lo cual redundaba en ventajas para ambas, según el punto de vista de ese Henleigh Mallinger Grandcourt, que por el momento nos es más familiar que Sir Hugo o que su sobrino Daniel Deronda.

En el juvenil retrato de Sir Hugo que aparecía con un cuello de vestir enrollado y un gran pañuelo, Sir Thomas Lawrence[74] había hecho justicia a la agradable expresión de entusiasmo y al fuerte temperamento que todavía se podía ver en el original, pero había hecho algo más que justicia al alargar ligeramente la nariz, que era en realidad más corta de lo que se podía esperar en un Mallinger. Por suerte, la nariz normal de la familia reapareció en su hermano pequeño, y recuperó toda su refinada regularidad en su sobrino Mallinger Grandcourt. Pero en el sobrino Daniel Deronda, los rostros de todo tipo de la familia, que se veían en las paredes de la galería, no hallaron reflejo. Con todo, era más hermoso que cualquiera de ellos, y cuando tenía trece años, podía haber servido de modelo para cualquier pintor que quisiera retratar al más memorable de los chicos: todo el que escudriñaba ese rostro a fondo no podía sino creer que el ser humano había actuado noblemente en el pasado y que actuaría aún más noblemente en el futuro. Los rostros juveniles más finos tienen este poder consagrador, y nos hacen estremecer al pensar que las grandes penas y desgracias del mundo, pueden entrar en ellos y profanarlos.

Pero en ese momento sobre la hierba entre los pétalos de rosa, Daniel Deronda tuvo un primer contacto con una de estas penas. Le había venido una nueva idea, y sus sentimientos habituales estaban empezando a cambiar de la misma forma que lo hacen los del viajero despreocupado y feliz que se encuentra con que de repente el cielo amenaza tormenta y despierta en él la sensación de peligro. Estaba sentado perfectamente recto de espaldas a su tutor, mientras su cara expresaba un repentino cambio interior. El profundo sonrojo, que le había sobrevenido nada más empezar a hablar, aún le duraba; pero sus rasgos mantenían ese aspecto indescriptible de actividad reprimida que a menudo acompaña al reconocimiento de una nueva interpretación de hechos familiares. No había vivido con otros niños, y mostraba una mezcla de ignorancia infantil con un conocimiento sorprendente, la misma que a menudo se observa en las niñas brillantes. Al haber leído a Shakespeare, además de una gran cantidad de historia, podría haber hablado con la

sabiduría de un chico estudioso sobre hombres que nacieron fuera del matrimonio y que, en consecuencia, fueron desafortunados, pues su posición desventajosa requería de ellos ser una especie de héroes si pretendían igualarse con hermanos legales. Pero nunca había asociado ese conocimiento consigo mismo, nunca había pensado en ello —hasta ese momento en que una rápida comparación le había encendido una luz—: la posibilidad de que ahí estuviera el secreto de su nacimiento, y que el hombre al que llamaba tío fuera en realidad su padre. Algunos chicos, incluso más jóvenes que Daniel, habían conocido por primera vez la ansiedad, como un invitado espeluznante e inamovible en sus tiernas vidas, al descubrir que sus padres, a los que se habían imaginado capaces de comprarlo todo, eran pobres y tenían grandes problemas económicos. Daniel sintió la presencia de un nuevo invitado que parecía llegar con un rostro enigmático y cubierto, y traer conjeturas turbias y revelaciones espantosas. El ardor con el que había seguido el mundo imaginario de sus libros de repente se precipitaba hacia su propia historia y descargaba en ella su energía manifiesta, explicando lo que conocía, representando lo desconocido. El tío al que amaba tanto tomó el aspecto de un padre que le ocultaba secretos sobre él, que se había portado mal con él, sí, muy mal. ¿Y qué había sido de su madre, de la que debían haberle separado a la fuerza? Secretos sobre los que él, Daniel, nunca podría inquirir; pues hablar o que le hablaran de estos nuevos pensamientos volvían a exaltarle la imaginación de la misma forma que una chispa puede reavivar un fuego. Aquellos que han vivido una infancia apasionada entenderán este temor a que se sepa cualquier deshonra relacionada con sus padres. La repentina aparición de nuevas imágenes le absorbió con la fuerza de la realidad conocida por primera vez, y le dejó sin capacidad de pensar que estaba sufriendo por algo que podía ser imaginario. La terrible sensación de conflicto entre la manifestación de un fuerte arrebato y el temor de su traición encontró alivio al fin en los sosegados lagrimones que cayeron sin freno hasta que se oyó la voz del señor Fraser diciendo:

—Daniel, ¿te das cuenta de que te estás sentando sobre las páginas dobladas de tu libro?

Daniel inmediatamente apartó el libro sin volverse, y tras sostenerlo ante él por un momento, se levantó con él y se marchó hacia los campos abiertos, donde podía secarse las lágrimas sin ser visto. Una vez hubo pasado el primer *shock*, fue capaz de recordar que no tenía certeza alguna de cómo habían sucedido realmente las cosas, y que había estado haciendo conjeturas sobre su

propia historia, de la misma forma que lo había hecho a menudo con Pericles[75] o Colón, rellenando los huecos de su historia antes de que fueran famosos. Solo volvieron de nuevo ciertos hechos que se empeñaban en mostrar la realidad, casi de la misma manera como las ruinas de un puente muestran indudablemente cómo estaban dispuestos los arcos. Y de nuevo volvió ese estado de ánimo en el que las conjeturas parecían como una duda sobre la religión, algo que debía ser relegado como ofensivo, o una curiosidad mezquina sobre cosas que se suponía no debía conocer; pues tal era la delicadeza de sentimiento de este chico. Pero la conclusión de las experiencias fluctuantes de esta época fue la de que le había abordado una impresión secreta que le estaba haciendo replantearse muchas de las cosas que le rodeaban en su vida. Y la idea que otras personas probablemente supieran cosas sobre él que no querían mencionar, y que no podría lograr sonsacárselas, forjó en él una reserva prematura que le ayudó a intensificar su experiencia interior. Sus oídos se abrieron entonces a palabras que antes de ese día de julio le habrían pasado inadvertidas; y cualquier incidente trivial que su imaginación pudiera relacionar con sospechas, desataba en él un haz de sentimientos enfrentados.

Uno de estos incidentes ocurrido un mes más tarde caló hondo en su vida. Daniel no solo tenía una de esas voces infantiles emocionantes que parecen trasportarnos ante un cielo y una tierra idílicos, sino además un buen instinto musical, y había hecho desde muy temprana edad acompañamientos para él mismo al piano, a la vez que cantaba de memoria. Desde entonces había estado recibiendo algunas clases, y Sir Hugo, encantado con el chico, solía pedirle interpretaciones suyas en presencia de invitados. Una mañana, tras haber estado cantando «Dulce Eco» ante un pequeño grupo de caballeros a los que la lluvia había mantenido en la casa, el baronet, que venía de hacer una observación sonriendo a su compañero de al lado, dijo:

—¡Ven aquí, Dan!

El chico se adelantó con inusual desgana. Llevaba una blusa holandesa bordada que resaltaba el rico colorido de su cabeza y su garganta; y la resistente pesadez que mostraban su boca y sus ojos mientras otros le sonreían, hacían su belleza aún más impresionante. Todo el mundo lo admiraba.

—¿Qué opinas de convertirte en un gran cantante? ¿Te gustaría que el mundo te adorara y que triunfaras enseguida, como Mario y Tamberlik[76]?

Daniel enrojeció instantáneamente, pero hubo un pequeño intervalo perceptible antes de que respondiera enfadado y con decisión:

—No, lo odiaría.

—¡Bueno, bueno, bueno! —dijo Sir Hugo, con una amabilidad sorprendida que pretendía ser tranquilizadora. Pero Daniel se volvió rápidamente, dejó la sala, y retirándose a su propia habitación se dejó caer en la ancha repisa de su ventana, su refugio favorito cuando no tenía nada que hacer en particular. Desde ahí pudo observar cómo la lluvia amainaba gradualmente dejando entrever destellos de luz a través de las nubes que se retiraban iluminando gran parte del parque, donde los viejos robles estaban separados cierta distancia unos de otros, dejando un espacio verde que atravesaba el bosque hasta encontrarse con el cielo oriental. Era esta una escena que había formado siempre parte de su casa, parte del augusto bienestar que había formado parte natural de su vida. Y su ardiente naturaleza aferrada se la había apropiado con cariño. Conocía bien lo que significaba ser un caballero por herencia, y sin pensar mucho en sí mismo, pues era un chico de enérgicas percepciones y olvidaba fácilmente su propia existencia imaginándose ser Robert Bruce[77], nunca había pensado que podía ser despojado de ese privilegio, o desempeñar un papel diferente en el mundo del que desempeñaba el tío que tanto lo mimaba. Es posible (aunque no es muy creíble actualmente) ser aficionado a la pobreza y tomarla por amante, preferir como sus propias pertenencias los estropajos, la arena roja y la cal, no deleitarse en ningún esplendor más que en lo que tiene las puertas abiertas para la nación entera, y gloriarse en no tener más privilegios que los que la naturaleza otorga; y ha habido nobles que han escapado del bienestar rebuscado y de la holgazanería, y han preferido atarse a duras labores manuales a cambio de un pequeño salario. Pero los gustos de Daniel iban todos encaminados a seguir cultivando su educación: su disposición era tal que las escenas y costumbres diarias no le producían *ennui*[78] o rebelión, sino deleite, afecto, aptitudes; y ahora al chico lo habían irritado con la idea de que su tío —tal vez su padre— quería que siguiera una carrera totalmente distinta de la suya y que sabía muy bien que no se hallaba entre los posibles destinos para los hijos de los caballeros ingleses. Había permanecido en Londres a menudo con Sir Hugo, el cual para satisfacer el oído del chico le había llevado a la ópera a oír a los grandes tenores, de modo que ver que un cantante triunfara rápidamente era una imagen muy vívida para él; pero ahora, a pesar de sus dones musicales, se opuso amargamente a la idea de vestirse

elegantemente para cantar ante toda esa gente fina que no lo consideraban más que un juguete maravilloso. Que Sir Hugo pensara que él tuviera que ocupar esa posición le pareció a Daniel una prueba irrefutable de que había algo en su nacimiento que lo excluía de la clase de caballeros a los que pertenecía el baronet. ¿Alguna vez se lo mencionaría? ¿Llegaría el tiempo en que su tío se lo contara todo? Se estremeció al pensarlo: en su imaginación, prefería la ignorancia. Si su padre había sido malvado —Daniel en su interior usaba palabras fuertes, pues sentía la injuria que se le había hecho como un niño mutilado siente el miembro aplastado cuando otros simplemente lo consideran como una estadística en los accidentes—, si su padre le había hecho daño, prefería que nunca se lo dijeran: era ya suficientemente hiriente pensar que otras personas pudieran compartir ese conocimiento. ¿Se hallaba entre ellas el señor Fraser? Probablemente no, de otra forma no habría hablado en esos términos acerca de los sobrinos de los papas: Daniel imaginó, como hacía la gente más mayor, que la consciencia de los demás era tan activa como la suya propia en un asunto que era crucial para él. ¿Lo sabía Turvey, el ayudante de cámara? ¿Y la vieja señora French, la ama de casa? ¿Y Banks, el capataz, con el que había cabalgado por las granjas en su *pony*? Y entonces le vino a la memoria un día unos años antes en el que estaba bebiendo un suero de la señora Banks, y el señor Banks dijo a su mujer con un guiño y una risa astuta: «¿Se parece a la madre, eh?». En esos momentos el pequeño Daniel simplemente pensó que Banks hizo un gañote, como solían hacer muchos granjeros —riéndose con lo que no es gracioso—; y más bien le molestó que hablaran de él guiñándose los ojos como si no entendiera nada. Pero ahora ese pequeño incidente se convirtió en información: había que pensar en ello. ¿Cómo podía ser que él fuera como su madre y no como su padre? Su madre debía haber sido un Mallinger, si Sir Hugo era su tío. ¡Pero no! Su padre podría haber sido el hermano de Sir Hugo y haber cambiado su nombre, como lo hizo el señor Henleigh Mallinger cuando se casó con la señorita Grandcourt. Pero entonces, ¿por qué nunca había oído hablar a Sir Hugo de su hermano Deronda, como hablaba de su hermano Grandcourt? A Daniel nunca le había importado antes el árbol genealógico de la familia, solo la parte que hacía referencia a ese ancestro que había matado a tres sarracenos en un encuentro. Pero ahora su pensamiento se volvió hacia un gabinete de la biblioteca que contenía un mapa de haciendas, donde una vez había visto colgado un pergamino iluminado, del que Sir Hugo dijo que era el árbol genealógico de la familia. La frase era nueva y extraña para él —era un

chiquillo por entonces, con apenas más de la mitad de los años de ahora—, y no le dio ningún significado específico. Ahora que sabía más deseaba examinar el pergamino. Imaginó que el gabinete estaba siempre cerrado con llave, pero quería probarlo. De todas formas, se contuvo. Podía ser visto; y no quería confirmar la herida que se había abierto en él.

Es en tales experiencias de la infancia, mientras los mayores debaten si la educación debe basarse en la ciencia o en la literatura, donde se definen los principales rasgos del carácter. Si Daniel hubiera tenido una naturaleza cariñosa menos ardiente, la reserva acerca de sí mismo y la suposición de que los demás le escondían algo desfavorable, podía haberse vuelto en un antagonismo rudo y orgulloso. Pero su ternura innata era lo suficientemente fuerte para no dejar lugar al resentimiento. Apenas había una criatura de su entorno por la que no sintiera afecto, aunque los molestaba ocasionalmente un poco a todos, por supuesto, a todos excepto a su tío, o «Nunc», como Sir Hugo le había enseñado a llamarle; pues el baronet era todo lo contrario a un hombre gazmoño, y cuidaba de su dignidad. A él Daniel lo quería de esa forma filial arraigada que hace que los niños sean más felices por estar en la misma habitación con su padre o su madre, a pesar de que estén ocupados en cosas distintas. La cadena del reloj de Sir Hugo, su sello para lacrar sobres, su escritura, su modo de fumar y de hablar a los perros y los caballos llevaban para el chico una rectitud y un encanto que iban a la par con la felicidad de la mañana y de la hora del desayuno. Como Sir Hugo había sido siempre un Whig[79], los Tories y los radicales pasaban a ser automáticamente y por igual los acérrimos oponentes; y los libros que había escrito eran todos vistos con tan buenos ojos que no distinguía lo que era de su cosecha de lo que no, a pesar de la semejanza general. Estos escritos eran de diversa índole, desde volúmenes de viaje en estilo brillante a artículos sobre cosas en general, y panfletos sobre crisis políticas; pero para Daniel eran iguales en el sentido en que todos ellos compartían una rectitud incuestionable, que podía servir para juzgar la información de las demás personas.

¿Quién no puede imaginar la amargura de la primera sospecha de que algo en este objeto de completa veneración *no* era del todo recto? Los niños piden que sus héroes sean inmaculados, y con facilidad los imaginan así: quizás un primer descubrimiento de que es lo contrario apenas es una sorpresa menos revolucionaria a un niño apasionado que el amenazado derrumbe de las creencias habituales que hacen que el mundo se tambalee en la vida adulta.

Pero poco después de que resurgiera la agitación de Daniel, este descubrió que Sir Hugo debía haber estado haciendo simplemente una tentativa jocosa con respecto a la cuestión sobre el canto. Sir Hugo pidió que Daniel se presentara en la biblioteca, y levantando la mirada de su escrito mientras el chico entraba, se reclinó hacia un lado en su sillón.

—¡Ah, Dan! —dijo amablemente, arrastrando uno de los viejos taburetes tapizados que estaba cerca de él—. Ven y siéntate aquí.

Daniel obedeció, y Sir Hugo le puso suavemente la mano sobre el hombro, mirándole cariñosamente.

—¿Qué te pasa, hijo? ¿Has oído algo que te ha alterado últimamente?

Daniel estaba decidido a no dejar que le afloraran las lágrimas, pero no pudo hablar.

—Todos los cambios son dolorosos cuando la gente ha sido feliz, ya sabes —dijo Sir Hugo, retirando la mano del hombro del chico y posándola sobre sus rizos oscuros a la vez que los acariciaba suavemente—. No puedes ser educado como me gustaría que lo fueses si no te vas. Y creo que encontrarás muchas cosas que te gusten en una escuela.

Esto no era lo que Daniel esperaba, y fue un alivio tan grande, que se animó a responder:

—¿Voy a ir a la escuela?

—Sí, mi intención es que vayas a Eton. Quiero que tengas la educación de un caballero; y para eso es necesario que vayas a un colegio privado para prepararte para la Universidad: Cambridge, es a la que quiero que vayas; fue mi propia universidad.

Daniel recuperó el color y lo volvió a perder.

—¿Qué dices a eso, muchacho? —dijo Sir Hugo, sonriendo.

—Me encantaría ser un caballero —dijo Daniel con firme distinción—, e ir al colegio, si eso es lo que el hijo de un caballero tiene que hacer.

Sir Hugo lo observó en silencio por unos momentos, pensando que entendía ahora por qué el chico parecía haberse enfadado al mencionar si quería ser un cantante. Entonces dijo con ternura:

—¿Así que no te importa dejar a tu viejo Nunc?

—Sí, claro —dijo Daniel, abrazando el brazo mimoso de Sir Hugo con sus dos manos—. ¿Pero no vendré y estaré con usted en vacaciones?

—Oh, sí, se supone que sí —dijo Sir Hugo—. Pero ahora quiero que vayas inmediatamente con un nuevo tutor, para que tu partida a Eton no sea un cambio tan brusco.

Tras esta entrevista, Daniel se animó de nuevo. Se esperaba de él que fuera un caballero, y de alguna forma inexplicable podía ser que todas sus conjeturas fueran erróneas. El mismo entusiasmo del muchacho le ayudó a encontrar serenidad en su ignorancia. Mientras estaba ocupado en la construcción de posibilidades, percibió claramente que debía haber posibilidades sobre las que no sabía nada. La alegría juvenil y el espíritu de aventura que había en él resurgieron de nuevo, dejó de darle vueltas al asunto, y durante el tiempo que estuvo en la casa antes de marcharse, cantó y bailó entre los viejos criados, obsequiándoles con regalos de despedida e insistió muchas veces al mozo de los caballos que cuidara bien del *pony* negro.

—¿Cree que sabré mucho menos que los demás chicos, señor Fraser? —dijo Daniel. Tendía a pensar que cualquier desconocido se sorprendería de su ignorancia.

—Hay burros por todas las partes del mundo —dijo el juicioso Fraser—. Tú no serás el más grande, pero no tienes los talentos de Porson, ni de Leibnitz tampoco.

—No quiero ser un Porson o un Leibnitz —dijo Daniel—. Preferiría ser un gran líder, como Pericles o Washington.

—Ay, ay, piensas que ellos lo consiguieron con poca sintáctica y menos álgebra —dijo Fraser. Pero en realidad consideraba a su pupilo un muchacho notable, para el que una cosa era tan fácil como otra si se ponía en serio.

Las cosas le fueron muy bien a Daniel en su nuevo ambiente, salvo por un chico con el que estuvo dispuesto nada más verlo a entablar una íntima amistad y que le habló mucho de su casa y sus padres y parecía esperar una confidencialidad similar a cambio. Daniel inmediatamente se retrajo, y esta experiencia frenó un poco su natural y dispuesta inclinación a formar amistades íntimas. Todo el mundo, incluido su tutor, le consideraba como un chico reservado, aunque era tan sencillo y estaba siempre de tan buen humor, además de ser bueno tanto en los estudios como en los deportes, que nadie calificó su reserva de desagradable. Ciertamente su rostro tenía mucho que ver con esa interpretación favorable; pero en este caso la belleza de sus labios cerrados no era hipócrita.

Una sorpresa que le ocurrió antes de sus primeras vacaciones reforzó la consciencia callada de llevar dentro de sí una aflicción, que podría ser comparada de alguna forma con la susceptibilidad de Byron[80] sobre su pie deforme. Sir Hugo le escribió contándole que se había casado con la señorita Raymond, una dulce dama que Daniel debía recordar haber visto. El

acontecimiento no iba a cambiar la previsión de pasar sus vacaciones en la Abadía; hallaría en Lady Mallinger una nueva amiga a la que estaba seguro que querría, y más cuando un hombre, habiendo hecho algo de su agrado, se dispone a hacer partícipes a los demás de su propia fortuna y de la satisfacción consecuente.

Excusemos en parte a Sir Hugo hasta que se sepan más a fondo los motivos de su actuación. Los errores en su actitud hacia Deronda se debían a esa falta de sensibilidad hacia lo que pasa por la mente de los demás, sobre todo la de los niños, cosa que se encuentra en las deficiencias más comunes incluso entre los hombres bondadosos como él, para los que la vida ha sido fácil, y han gastado discretamente sus energías en sentirse gratificados. Nadie era más consciente que él que se sospechaba que Daniel fuera su propio hijo. Pero a él le agradaba tal sospecha; y nunca se había preocupado ni una sola vez en que el enigmático aspecto de las circunstancias pudiera afectar al chico, ni entonces ni en el futuro. Le quería tanto como se puede querer a alguien y procuraba lo mejor para él. Y considerando la ligereza con la que las consciencias respetables se toman la instrucción de las almas jóvenes, apenas se le puede reprochar nada a Sir Hugo Mallinger. Había permanecido soltero hasta los cuarenta y cinco años; había sido considerado siempre como un hombre fascinante de gustos exquisitos; ¿qué podía ser más natural que el tener un hermoso niño como el pequeño Deronda para cuidar de él? La madre podría incluso seguir viva y encontrarse con Sir Hugo en alguna de sus residencias en el extranjero. La única persona que podía tener alguna objeción era el propio niño, al que no podían consultar. Y las objeciones del niño no le preocuparon nunca a nadie salvo a él mismo.

Para cuando Deronda estaba listo para ir a Cambridge, Lady Mallinger tenía ya tres hijas, unos bebés encantadores, las tres, pero cuyo sexo fue anunciado como una alternativa melancólica, al desear tener un niño: si Sir Hugo no tenía ningún hijo la sucesión debería ir a parar a su sobrino Mallinger Grandcourt. Daniel no volvió a mostrar dudas sobre su propio nacimiento. A medida que fue ganando conocimiento, estaba cada vez más convencido que Sir Hugo era su padre, y pensó que el baronet, dado que nunca mostró intención alguna de hablar sobre el asunto, deseaba que el hecho se diera por sobreentendido y aceptar en silencio lo que por norma general sería considerado algo más que el amor y educación debidas. El casamiento de Sir Hugo podía haber sido considerado ciertamente como un nuevo motivo de resentimiento por otros jóvenes en la posición de Deronda, y

habrían mirado con el ceño fruncido la imagen que formaban la tímida señora Mallinger con sus pequeños retoños que vinieron rápidamente, al alejar los sentimientos y las posesiones del baronet de quien se consideraba prioritario. Pero el odio a los obstáculos creados por personas que no tenían la culpa era una forma de estupidez moral que no se hallaba en los principios de Deronda; incluso la indignación que desde hacía tiempo se mezclaba con su afecto por Sir Hugo tomó la cualidad de pena más que de enojo; y mientras se hacía a la idea de la tolerancia por el error, normalmente asociaba la idea con sus propios agravios silenciosos.

El sentido de una supuesta desventaja —el pie deformado dudosamente escondido por el zapato—, fomenta un impulso espiritual incansablemente activo, y fácilmente convierte un carácter egoísta y hostil en un ismaelita. Pero en alguna rara ocasión, hay quienes ven su derecho frustrado como uno entre un millón, y la inexorable pena toma la forma de compañerismo y enternece la imaginación. La precoz susceptibilidad de Deronda, cargada al principio con aguda indignación y orgullo tenaz, había despertado en él una reflexión prematura sobre ciertas cuestiones de la vida; había otorgado un sesgo a su conciencia, una conmiseración hacia ciertas enfermedades, y una forma determinada de tomar decisiones, lo que lo diferenciaba de otros jóvenes mucho más de cualquier otro talento que poseía.

Un día cercano al final de las vacaciones largas, en las cuales había estado de viaje por la ribera del Rin con su tutor de Eton, y en el que había venido para una pequeña estancia de despedida a la Abadía antes de volver a Cambridge, dijo a Sir Hugo:

—¿Qué pretende que sea, señor? —Estaban en la biblioteca y era por la mañana temprano. Sir Hugo le había llamado para leer una carta de un catedrático de Cambridge que estaba interesado en él; y como el baronet tenía un aire pausado y como de negocios, parecía el momento oportuno para introducir un asunto serio que nunca había sido discutido en profundidad.

—Aquello para lo que tu inclinación te lleve, hijo mío. Creí que lo correcto era darte la opción del ejército, pero cerraste las puertas a ello, y yo me alegré. No espero que elijas tan pronto; en algún momento, cuando te conozcas mejor y hayas probado tu temple entre hombres más mayores. La universidad es una buena puerta de entrada al foro. Hay premios que ganar, y un poco de buena suerte cambia a menudo los gustos de un hombre. Por lo que veo y oigo, creo que puedes optar por lo que quieras. Te desenvuelves como pez en el agua con tus clásicos, más de lo que yo fui capaz, y si te cansa

nadar en aguas tan profundas, Cambridge es el lugar donde puedes adentrarte en las matemáticas y continuar por tierra firme tanto como quieras. Yo luché por mantenerme a flote como una carpa.

—Supongo que el dinero marcará la diferencia, señor —dijo Daniel, sonrojándose—. Tendré que mantenerme en el futuro.

—No exactamente. Te recomiendo que no seas extravagante… sí, sí, ya sé que tú no eres aficionado a eso; pero no tienes que hacer nada que vaya en contra de tus principios. Tendrás los ingresos de un licenciado, lo suficiente para buscar algo. Tal vez debería decirte que debes considerarte seguro con setecientos al año. Puedes hacer de ti un abogado, convertirte en un escritor, introducirte en la política. Te confieso que es lo que más me agradaría. Me encantaría tenerte a mi lado batallando conmigo.

Deronda parecía incómodo. Sentía que debía mostrar algún signo de gratitud, pero otros sentimientos le atascaron la lengua. Algo en su interior le empujaba a aprovechar ese momento para preguntar por su nacimiento, y con todo, parecía más imposible que nunca que la pregunta hallase salida, y más imposible aún que oyera ciertas cosas de los labios de Sir Hugo. El modo liberal con el que había sido tratado era de lo más sorprendente porque el baronet se había preocupado últimamente del dinero, y sobre todo se había interesado en la hacienda para poder proveer en el futuro a sus hijas; y mientras todo esto cruzó por la mente de Daniel, se le ocurrió momentáneamente que la provisión para él podría venir, de alguna forma, de su madre. Pero tal etérea conjetura se fue tan rápido como vino.

Sir Hugo no pareció notar nada peculiar en la actitud de Daniel, y continuó con su habitual vivacidad charlatana.

—Me alegra que hayas leído otras cosas además de tus clásicos, y le hayas hincado el diente al francés y al alemán. La verdad es que, a menos que un hombre pueda obtener el prestigio y el sueldo de un catedrático y escribir libros académicos, apenas le sirve de mucho hacer de él una máquina de griego y latín y ser capaz de continuar recitando varias páginas seguidas de dramaturgos griegos a partir de cualquier verso que se le dé como indicación. Todo eso está muy bien, pero en la práctica nadie te va a dar una cita griega para que la continúes. De hecho, me gustaría que vigilaras el refinamiento de las conversaciones: muchas citas del tipo que sean, incluso en inglés, son malas. Tienden a sofocar las observaciones ordinarias. No se podría seguir viviendo si nos apartamos un poco del pensamiento de que todo ha sido ya dicho de una forma mejor que lo que uno es capaz de expresarlo. Pero

hablando de catedráticos, he visto a uno que ha logrado ser un personaje eminente de la sociedad; y es capaz de vez en cuando de soltar un sermón de sabiduría en el lugar adecuado, cosa muy apropiada en política. Se necesitan hombres así, y si tienes la oportunidad de ser un catedrático, no tengo nada que objetar.

—Creo que no es muy probable. Quicsett y Puller son ambos más fuertes que yo. Espero que no le decepcione demasiado si no obtengo grandes honores.

—No, no. Quiero que ganes el mayor prestigio posible pero, por el amor de Dios, no vuelvas como una especie de idiota de nivel superior, como el joven Brecon, que tuvo una doble Matrícula, y ha estado aprendiendo a coser tirantes desde entonces. Lo que quiero que saques de ahí es un pasaporte para la vida. Yo no estoy en contra de nuestro sistema universitario: queremos que se sepa un poco de cultura desinteresada, más incluso que de algodón y de capital, especialmente en la Cámara. Yo he perdido todo mi griego: si tuviera que traducir literalmente un verso de repente lo haría francamente mal. Pero el griego forjó mi estilo. Diría incluso que mi inglés es mejor gracias a él.

En este punto, Daniel mantuvo un respetuoso silencio. La fe entusiasta en los escritos de Sir Hugo como modelo, y en los Whigs como en la raza escogida para la política, había ido desvaneciéndose junto con el rostro seráfico del chico. No era de los que más había trabajado en Eton. A pesar de que ciertas materias y lecturas le resultaban tan fáciles como ir en bote, no estaba hecho de esa materia que le convierte a uno en el primer estudiante de Eton. Le había sobrevenido un anhelo contemplativo por el conocimiento amplio, lo cual casi siempre rebaja la exaltación en la lucha por destacarse en los primeros puestos. Por suerte, era modesto, y aceptaba cualquier mediocridad que hubiera en él como un hecho, no como algo de lo que tenían que darse cuenta por fuerza sus superiores. Aún así, la alta opinión del señor Fraser acerca del chico no habría sido desmentida por este: Daniel llevaba el sello de una rareza en un manso fervor de simpatía, un derroche de imaginación a favor de los demás, que no se mostraba efusivamente, pero que era continuamente visto en actos de consideración que sorprendían a sus compañeros como signos de excentricidad moral. «Deronda habría sido el primero de todos si hubiera tenido más ambición» —era un comentario frecuente sobre él—. ¿Pero cómo podía prosperar una persona cuando declinaba luchar a favor de sí mismo, y elegía ser derribado cuando estaba a punto de conseguir la victoria, y a diferencia del gran Clive[81], prefería ser el

ternero al carnicero? Era un error, sin embargo, suponer que no tuviera su parte de ambición: sabemos que había sufrido agudamente por creer que había un tizne de deshonor por su parte; pero hay algunos casos, y el suyo era uno de ellos, en los que el sentido de la injusticia acarrea, no la voluntad de infligir injusticias y aprovecharse de ellas para trepar, sino un odio a toda injusticia. Tenía sus momentos de fiereza, y podía atacar si se presentaba la ocasión, aunque las ocasiones no eran siempre lo que se podía haber esperado. Pues en lo que a él se refería, sus impulsos resentidos habían sido controlados desde el inicio por una afectividad magistral. El amor tiene la costumbre de decir «no importa» al mal humor, el cual, se aparta ocasionalmente a un lado y poco a poco acaba por acostumbrarse. Así que, a medida que Deronda iba haciéndose un hombre, su sentimiento hacia Sir Hugo, a pesar de ir cada vez más mezclado con la crítica, iba ganando esa especie de tolerancia que reconcilia la crítica con la ternura. El dulce y viejo hogar, y todo lo asociado a él, Lady Mallinger y sus pequeñas incluidas, fueron objetos de respeto tanto como lo habían sido hacia él, solo que con una pequeña diferencia de perspectiva. El retablo ya no era milagrosamente perfecto, pintado bajo una guía infalible, sino que se discernía una mano humana en ese trabajo que apelaba a una ternura reverente más segura que los destellos del descubrimiento. Ciertamente la ambición de Deronda, incluso en la flor de la vida, permanecía excepcionalmente libre de la exultación manifiesta y vulgar, y de otras formas desagradables de energía infantil; tal vez porque desde muy temprano se apasionó por las ideas, y sublimó su fogosidad en tales alturas. Uno puede malgastar una gran cantidad de energía en odiar y oponerse a lo que otros persiguen, y un chico que se encapricha del estuche de lápices de otro puede no ser tan enérgico como otro que disfruta regalando el suyo. Con todo, Deronda no era de los que se limpiaba las manos de las escenas desagradables: se interesaba por ellas y cuidaba del que salía peor parado. Le ayudó a ser considerado más popular el comprometerse de vez en cuando por medio de este aparente compañerismo. Pues el interés contemplativo en aprender cómo se producían las miserias humanas —tan precoz en él como el tipo de genialidad en el poeta que escribe una *Reina Mab*[82] a los diecinueve años— estaba tan arraigado en él con la amabilidad que fácilmente se tomaba por compañerismo. Suficiente. Sucede a menudo que en la vida de nuestros vecinos, no solo encontramos errores y deslices, sino también cierta bondad distinguida que no puede ser descrita con palabras, tan solo adivinada, según nuestra intuición.

La impresión que causó en Cambridge fue la misma que en Eton. Todos los que se interesaron en él coincidieron en que podía haber ocupado un nivel más alto si hubiera estado más incentivado, y no se hubiera complicado con la idea de considerar los estudios como algo que alimentaba la motivación y la opinión, en lugar de considerarlos como los instrumentos de éxito, una idea que le llevó a desarrollar arduas críticas y discusiones cuando debía haber invertido sus fuerzas en las propias asignaturas. Al principio encontró en su trabajo en la universidad una nueva motivación: aburrido de sus ejercicios clásicos en Eton, se aplicó con vigor a las matemáticas, por las que había mostrado una temprana aptitud ya con el señor Fraser, y tenía el placer de sentir su destreza en tal materia. Ese placer, y la opinión favorable de su tutor, le llevaron a intentar conseguir una beca de matemáticas para la Pascua de su segundo año: quería satisfacer a Sir Hugo con algún logro, y el estudio de las matemáticas del máximo nivel, además de la fascinación inherente asociada a cualquier actividad del pensamiento que requiera intensidad, le estaba convirtiendo en un trabajador más exclusivo de lo que había sido con anterioridad.

Pero entonces se topó con el viejo freno que había ido creciendo con su desarrollo. Halló que su inclinación interior hacia la comprensión y el detenimiento divergía cada vez más del sistema de exámenes implantado: le producía una gran decepción la desgastante inutilidad y el esfuerzo debilitador que suponía la exigencia de una destreza y una retención de datos excesiva sin que luego se interiorizasen los principios que forman las conexiones vitales del conocimiento. (La graduación de Deronda ocurrió hace quince años, cuando todavía no era indiscutible la perfección de nuestro método universitario). En los momentos de insatisfacción extrema se reprochaba haber sido seducido por las ventajas convencionales de formar parte de una universidad inglesa, y se sentía tentado de pedirle a Sir Hugo que le dejara abandonar Cambridge y buscar una línea de estudio más independiente en el extranjero. El origen de esta inclinación ya se había manifestado en su amor juvenil por la Historia Universal, que le hicieron querer sentirse como en casa en países extranjeros, e imaginarse a los estudiantes que viajaban en la Edad Media. Echaba de menos ahora tener el tipo de aprendizaje en la vida que no le moldeara demasiado definitivamente, y le robara la posibilidad de elección que pudiera desprenderse de un desarrollo libre. Puede observarse que los deméritos de Deronda se situaban probablemente del lado de la duda reflexiva, y esta tendencia se acentuaba por

su posición: no había ninguna necesidad inmediata de unos ingresos inmediatos, o de prepararse apresuradamente para una profesión; y su susceptibilidad hacia los hechos medio conocidos de su parentesco constituía una excusa para demorarse más que otros en un estado de neutralidad social. Otros hombres, se decía, tienen una posición y unas obligaciones más definitivas. Pero el proyecto que lisonjeaba su inclinación no habría pasado probablemente del inefectivo estado de meditación melancólica si ciertas circunstancias no lo hubieran precipitado hacia la acción.

Las circunstancias surgieron de una calurosa amistad que se extendía más allá de la universidad. De su mismo año, y ocupando habitaciones cercanas a las de él, había un joven que había venido como expositor del Christ's Hospital, y tenía excentricidades suficientes propias de un Charles Lamb[83]. Solo mirar sus rasgos ceñidos y su pelo rubio que caía sobre su cuello recordaba uno de los pintorescos bustos pálidos de los primeros pintores alemanes; y cuando este débil colorido era iluminado por una broma, aparecían pliegues repentinos alrededor de la boca y de los ojos que podían haber pertenecido a un humorista de edad. Su padre, un grabador de cierto rango, había muerto hace once años, y su madre tenía tres niñas que educar y mantener con una anualidad precaria. Hans Meyrick —había sido bautizado atrevidamente con el nombre de Holbein[84]— se sentía el pilar, o más bien el tronco retorcido y lleno de nódulos, sobre el cual estas frágiles plantas trepadoras debían sustentarse. No faltaba capacidad o afecto sincero para hacer el sostén fiable: la facilidad y la rapidez con la que estudiaba podrían servirle para ganar premios en Cambridge, como había hecho entre las «casacas azules» a pesar de sus irregularidades. El único peligro era que no sabía calcular el tiempo de sus tendencias impredecibles, y que sus buenas intenciones podían ser frustradas por algún acto que no fuera realizado por costumbre, sino por impulsos caprichosos y aislados. No podía decirse de él que tuviera ningún mal hábito; pero a intervalos más o menos cortos cometía traviesas imprudencias, y hacía cosas que habrían resultado muy malos hábitos.

Cuando estaba en sus cabales, Han era, sin embargo, una criatura encantadora, y resultó que encontró en Deronda un amigo dispuesto a apoyarle con la máxima constancia, por la compasión que le suscitaban estas breves aberraciones que traían luego un gran arrepentimiento. Hans, ciertamente, compartía las habitaciones de Deronda casi tanto como usaba las suyas; confió a Deronda sus estudios, sus asuntos y sus esperanzas; la pobreza

de su casa y su amor por sus criaturas; el hormigueo de sus dedos por dibujar y su determinación de satisfacerlo para lograr un poco de dinero que compartir con su madre y sus hermanas. No quería confidencias a cambio, pero parecía que tomaba a Deronda por un dios del Olimpo que no necesitaba nada, un egotismo en la amistad que es bastante común en naturalezas volubles y expansivas. Deronda estaba contento, y se interesó por Meyrick todo lo que este requería, preocupándose al final como si fuera su hermano, cuidando de él en sus momentos imprevisibles, y arreglándoselas por medio de tretas sutiles no solo para suplir la falta de dinero de su amigo, sino además para salvarle de situaciones amenazantes. Una amistad así se vuelve fácilmente tierna: uno despliega fuertes alas protectoras que se deleitan en extenderse, el otro recibe la cálida protección, que también es una delicia. Meyrick se estaba preparando para obtener una beca en letras clásicas, y su progreso, en algunos aspectos importantes, se debía con toda probabilidad a la influencia de la amistad de Deronda.

Pero una imprudencia de Meyrick, cometida a principios del trimestre de otoño, amenazó con decepcionar sus esperanzas. Con su alternancia habitual entre un gasto innecesario y una austeridad absoluta, había entregado demasiado dinero por un viejo grabado que le fascinaba, y para compensarlo, había vuelto de Londres en un carruaje de tercera clase con sus ojos expuestos a un viento cortante y a cualquier partícula irritante que llevara consigo. Como consecuencia sufrió una severa inflamación en los ojos, que por algún tiempo le alarmó con la amenaza de durar más de lo previsto. Este serio problema hizo que Deronda se dedicara por él al completo, relegando a un segundo plano cualquier otra ocupación que no fuera ser su compañero y sus ojos, trabajando con él y por él con sus clásicos, por si todavía podía salvarse su beca. Hans, para evitar que su madre y sus hermanas se enterasen de su sufrimiento, alegó que tenía mucho trabajo para pasar las navidades en Cambridge, y su amigo permaneció con él.

Mientras, Deronda se relajó en sus estudios de matemáticas, y Hans, reflexionando sobre ello, le dijo detenidamente:

—Querido compañero, mientras me ayudas a progresar, estás arriesgando tu carrera. Con el estudio de las matemáticas te puede pasar lo que a Moisés o a Mahoma o a alguien de esos, que después de empollar, olvidaron en un día lo que les había llevado cuarenta años aprender.

Deronda no iba a admitir que le importaba ese riesgo, y realmente le era un poco indiferente porque había sido seducido por un doble motivo: por una

parte, le preocupaba mucho que Hans no fuera a perder la necesitada beca, y por otra sintió renacer su interés en los estudios clásicos. Con todo, cuando Hans, hacia el final del día, era ya capaz de usar sus propios ojos, Deronda tenía la suficiente fuerza de voluntad para seguir estudiando duramente y recuperar el tiempo perdido. Sin embargó, él suspendió; pero tuvo la satisfacción de ver a Meyrick ganarse la beca.

El éxito, siendo una especie de punto de partida que alienta a la terminación, podía haber reconciliado a Deronda con su curso universitario; pero la vaciedad de todas las cosas, desde la política hasta los pasatiempos, nunca nos es tan llamativa como cuando fracasamos en ellas. El fracaso del triunfo personal no le resultaba duro, pero la sensación de haber malgastado inútilmente su tiempo en un modo de trabajar que había ido en contra de sus principios, le desilusionó para volver a empezar de nuevo el proceso, y se replanteó seriamente su antiguo deseo de abandonar Cambridge. Al hablar de su intención a Meyrick, se lo presentó de forma que parecía que estuviera contento del signo de los acontecimientos, contento de que la balanza se hubiera decantado hacia un lado claramente, y de sentirse libre de sus indecisiones; pero sabía que tenía por supuesto que someterse a cualquier objeción al respecto que le hiciera Sir Hugo.

La alegría y la gratitud de Meyrick estuvieron empañadas con una gran ansiedad. Creía en la presunta preferencia de Deronda, pero sentía profundamente que al servirle a él, Daniel se había situado en una situación desventajosa en la opinión de Sir Hugo, y dijo con pena:

—Si hubieras obtenido la beca, habrías quedado mejor con Sir Hugo al pedirle dejar los estudios. Has arruinado tu suerte por mi causa, y no puedo hacer nada para arreglarlo.

—Sí, claro que puedes. Vas a ser un estudiante de primera. Considero que he hecho una inversión de primera con mi suerte.

—¡Oh, qué demonios! Evitas que se hunda un feo animalillo, y esperas que se convierta en una figura hermosa. Los poetas han escrito suficientes tragedias sobre personas que han abrazado el mal por conseguir algo dulce; yo escribiré una tragedia sobre un compañero que abrazó el bien, y por siempre después fue desdichado.

Pero Hans no perdió ni un minuto en escribir secretamente la historia del asunto a Sir Hugo, dejando claro que si no hubiera sido por la dedicación generosa de Deronda, él no habría podido ganar el premio por el que había estado trabajando.

Los dos amigos subieron a la ciudad juntos: Meyrick para regocijarse con su madre y las niñas en su pequeña casa en Chelsea; Deronda para llevar a cabo la menos agradable tarea de abrir su mente a Sir Hugo. Confiaba un poco en la tolerancia general del baronet hacia las excentricidades, pero esperaba más oposición que la que se encontró. Fue recibido incluso con una amabilidad más calurosa que nunca, apenas se tocó el tema del suspenso, y cuando detalló sus motivos por desear abandonar la universidad e ir a estudiar en el extranjero, Sir Hugo se sentó por un momento en silencio, más bien meditando que sorprendido. Al final dijo, mirando a Daniel detenidamente:

—¿Así que después de todo no quieres ser un caballero inglés?

—Sí que quiero, pero deseo entender otros puntos de vista. Y quiero librarme de una actitud meramente inglesa en los estudios.

—Ya veo, no quieres ser forjado en el mismo molde que los demás jóvenes. Y no tengo nada que decir contra tu descubrimiento de nuestros prejuicios nacionales. Yo mismo me siento mejor por haber pasado buena parte de mi tiempo en el extranjero. Pero, por el amor de Dios, ¡mantén un porte inglés, y no te acostumbres al tabaco malo! Y, mi querido hijo, es bueno ser desprendido y generoso; pero no lo lleves demasiado lejos. No funcionará que te sacrifiques y te anules a ti mismo por el beneficio de los demás; debes saber dónde encontrarte. No obstante, no voy a poner ningún impedimento a que te marches. Si pudiera librarme del Comité me iría contigo.

Así que Deronda se marchó como realmente quería, no sin antes pasar unas horas con Hans Meyrick, quien le presentó a su madre y a sus hermanas en la casa de Chelsea. Las tímidas chicas observaron y registraron cada mirada del amigo de su hermano, declarado por Hans su salvador, un compañero como ninguno, y una buena persona en la que se podía confiar. Ellas idealizaron tanto a Deronda como un ideal, que cuando se hubo marchado, la pequeña se puso a trabajar, ante la crítica de las dos hermanas mayores, pintándole como el Príncipe Camaralzamán[85].

Capítulo 17

> Canta el poeta esta verdad
> que la pena de las penas recuerda cosas más felices
>
> TENNYSON, *Locksley Hall*

UNA NOCHE AGRADABLE DE FINALES DE JUNIO, DERONDA IBA REMANDO POR EL Támesis. Hacía ya un año o más que había regresado a Inglaterra, con el convencimiento de que su educación había terminado, y que de alguna manera iba a entrar a formar parte de la sociedad inglesa; pero aunque, en deferencia al deseo de Sir Hugo, y para desprenderse de la pereza, había empezado a leer libros de leyes, esta aparente decisión no había dado más resultado que profundizar las raíces de su indecisión. Su antigua pasión por el remo se había avivado al máximo ahora que estaba en la ciudad con los Mallingers, porque en ninguna otra parte podía encontrar la misma reclusión que le daba el río. Poseía un bote propio en Putney, y cuando Sir Hugo no lo quería en casa, su pasatiempo favorito era remar hasta pasado el ocaso y regresar acompañado de las estrellas. No es que pasara por una etapa sentimental; pero se hallaba en otro estado contemplativo, tal vez más común entre los jóvenes de hoy, ese por el que se preguntan si merece la pena tomar parte en la batalla del mundo: me refiero, por supuesto, a los jóvenes que pueden permitirse la improductiva tarea de preguntarse tal cosa al tener el respaldo de un tres o un cinco por ciento de un capital por el que otro ha batallado. A Sir Hugo le desorientó que alguien que contrastaba grandemente con todo lo que fuera enfermizo y quejumbroso fuera ofuscado por ideas que, como no afectaban en absoluto a un Whig consagrado como él, no podían ser más que fantasías imaginarias; especialmente cuando Deronda se posicionó en contra de la autoría literaria —una vocación que convierte las ideas tontas en fondos económicos—.

Remando vestido con una camiseta azul marino y un gorro, con los rizos de su pelo recortados, su boca asediada con los abundantes y suaves remolinos que formaba su barba, su imagen escondía rasgos del niño seráfico que «arrastraba nubes de gloria»[86]. Es más, incluso alguien que no le hubiera visto desde su niñez le habría al fin reconocido, debido tal vez a la peculiaridad de su mirada que Gwendolen decidió catalogar como «terrible»,

aunque su forma de observar era en realidad muy discreta. La voz, que a veces se dejaba oír en algunos fragmentos aislados de una canción, se había convertido simplemente en la de un barítono alto; de hecho, con solo mirar su poderosa y flexible estructura, y la firme gravedad de su rostro habría sido suficiente para que un observador experimentado se diera cuenta que no tenía una de esas voces de tenor peculiar y deslumbrante como las que origina a veces la naturaleza a costa de algún sacrificio. Observemos sus manos: no son ni pequeñas ni forman hoyuelos, sus dedos no son como los que acaban en punta que parecen que tengan solo un tacto modesto; los suyos son largos, flexibles, en manos firmes, como las que Tiziano había pintado en un cuadro en el que quería mostrar la combinación de la delicadeza con la fuerza. Y hay una semejanza, también, entre los rostros de los dueños de estas manos, tanto en la piel uniformemente morena como en la ceja perpendicular y los tranquilos ojos penetrantes. Y no hay en él serafín: es completamente terrestre y viril; pero del tipo que hace creer en una dignidad humana que es capaz de admitir parientes pobres.

Gente así se topa con nosotros de vez en cuando en condiciones normales; por ejemplo, en un trabajador que silba mientras hace sus medidas y levanta sus ojos para responder a nuestra pregunta sobre la carretera. Y a menudo, el significado real tanto de los rostros como de las palabras escritas está principalmente en las impresiones de aquellos que las ven. Pero son precisamente estas impresiones las que resultan tener ahora importancia en relación con Deronda, remando por el Támesis con un atuendo muy discreto para un joven caballero en su tiempo de ocio, y pasando por debajo del puente Kew Bridge sin el pensamiento de que por su apariencia fuera a tomar parte en aventura alguna. De hecho, se oponía fuertemente a la idea, que otros no le habían dejado no pensar, que su apariencia era de las que llamaba la atención; y tales insinuaciones, que pretendían ser un cumplido, le enfadaban, pues le recordaban experiencias confusas, de las que ya había averiguado algo. Su propio rostro reflejado en el espejo había sido asociado durante muchos años con el pensamiento de que tenía que ser como alguien, alguien cuyo carácter y destino era siempre un enigma, y nunca se atrevía a preguntar.

En el barrio de Kew Bridge, entre las seis y las siete de la tarde, el río no estaba solitario. Varias personas paseaban por el camino de los remolques, y por acá y por allá se veía algún bote echando cabos. Deronda había estado remando rápido para llegar a este lugar; cuando se dio cuenta que una gran barcaza avanzaba hacia él, apartó su bote a un lado, y esperó con su remo a un

par de yardas de la orilla del río. Mientras, continuaba tarareando inconscientemente la tonadilla que había embrujado su garganta por todo el trayecto por el río —la canción del gondolero del «Othello», en la que Rossini había puesto dignamente en música las inmortales palabras de Dante:

> Nessun maggiore dolore
> Che ricordarsi del tempo felice
> *Nella miseria*[87].

Y, mientras descansaba apoyado en su remo, el súbito *pianissimo* del lamento melódico *nella miseria* fue oído perfectamente al borde del agua. Tres o cuatro personas se habían detenido en varios lugares para ver pasar la barcaza por el puente, y obviamente se fijaron también en el joven caballero de la barca; pero probablemente solo hubo un oído que recibió los leves sonidos vocálicos de forma distinta que si se tratara del murmullo de un insecto en medio de la suma de los ruidos del momento. Deronda, esperando a la gran barca, volvió la cabeza hacia la orilla, y vio a unas pocas yardas de distancia a una figura que podía haber sido la personificación de la miseria a la que inconscientemente estaba poniendo voz: una chica de apenas más de dieciocho años, de figura esbelta, con una pequeña cara delicada, sus rizos morenos recogidos detrás de un gran sombrero negro, y con un largo abrigo de algodón sobre sus hombros. Tenía las manos entrelazadas ante ella, y sus ojos estaban fijos en el río con una mirada estática e inamovible de desesperación. Le captó tanto la atención que dejó de cantar: por lo visto su voz había calado dentro de ella paulatinamente y sin darse cuenta, puesto que cuando paró de repente, ella cambió ligeramente su postura, y mirando a su alrededor algo asustada, se encontró con el rostro de Deronda. Solo fueron un par de momentos, pero eso parece mucho tiempo para dos personas que se miran directamente a los ojos. Ella tenía una mirada como la de un cervatillo o algún otro animal inocente antes de que la apartara y se marchara apresuradamente: no hubo sonrojo ni ningún tipo de sobresalto especial, tan solo algo de timidez que sin embargo no le impidió prolongar su mirada antes de marcharse. De hecho, a Deronda le dio la sensación de que ella solo era medio consciente de lo que pasaba su alrededor: ¿tenía hambre o había algún otro motivo por su aturdimiento? Sintió una punzada de interés y de compasión por ella; pero al momento siguiente se había vuelto y se había dirigido hacia un banco cercano debajo de un árbol. Él no tenía derecho a detenerse y observarla: es común ver a mujeres pobremente vestidas y

melancólicas; lo único excepcional era la belleza delicada, las líneas y el color pintorescos de la imagen, y estas condiciones hacían todavía más imposible que se entrometiera. Comenzó a remar de nuevo, y no tardó en llegar al final del río; pero no podía quitarse con otros pensamientos la pálida imagen de la chica infeliz. Una y otra vez especulaba sobre el probable romance que se escondía tras esa soledad y esa mirada de desolación; luego se sonreía a sí mismo por compartir el prejuicio de que los rostros interesantes debían tener aventuras interesantes; y acababa por justificarse al sentir que la pena era aún más trágica cuando recae sobre una belleza fina e ingenua.

«No debería haber olvidado la mirada de desgracia si ella hubiera sido fea y vulgar», se dijo. Pero no podía negar que la belleza de la imagen era lo que la hacía durar tanto. La conservaba tan nítida como un camafeo de ónix: las ropas de un color entre negro y marrón, la cara blanca con rasgos muy pequeños y ojos oscuros con largas pestañas. Su mente recorrió las tragedias que viven las chicas por el mundo, tragedias escondidas, desapercibidas, como las que suceden tras los setos, donde las desvalidas abandonadas arrastran sus alas heridas, y rasgan el musgo de la sombra con la aguja roja del reloj de su propia muerte. Últimamente, Deronda, en sus excursiones solitarias, había estado ocupado sobre todo con las incertidumbres de su propio destino; pero tales incertidumbres, que venían a su antojo, tenían por costumbre estar tan conectadas ampliamente con toda la vida y la historia que la nueva imagen de tristeza desvalida se mezclaba fácilmente con lo que le parecían los verdaderos motivos por los que debía evitar entrar en esa rutina por la que los hombres se disculpan por todos sus errores, y tomar las opiniones como mero material profesional, o los motivos por los que no debía intentar desenhebrar el embrollado y desesperado estado de las cosas.

Usaba poco los remos, satisfecho de verse arrastrado por las aguas hacia atrás. Era su costumbre complacerse en esa solemne pasividad que llega tranquilamente con el alargamiento de las sombras y la disminución de la luz, cuando el pensamiento y el deseo se funden imperceptiblemente, y lo que en otros momentos podía verse como motivo de discusión cobra la calidad de visión apasionada. Para cuando había regresado de nuevo por la corriente al puente de Richmond el sol se estaba poniendo; y la proximidad de su hora favorita —con su quietud profunda y masas oscuras de árboles y edificios entre el doble fulgor del cielo y el río— le animó a quedarse un rato más como si estuviera ante un espectáculo musical aún inconcluso. Buscó un lugar solitario que fuera bueno para amarrar su bote a la orilla, y tumbándose de

espaldas con la cabeza apoyada en los cojines, pudo observar la luz del ocaso y la aparición de las primeras estrellas, que algún poeta oriental describe como la llamada de Dios a cada una de ellas, que al responder «aquí estoy» se iluminan. Eligió un sitio en un recodo del río que quedaba justo enfrente a los jardines de Kew Gardens, donde tenía ante él una considerable masa de agua que reflejaba la gloria del cielo, mientras él mismo permanecía a la sombra. Se tumbó con las manos detrás de la cabeza al mismo nivel que el borde del bote para poder ver todo lo que había a su alrededor sin ser visto por nadie a pocas yardas de distancia; y durante un buen rato no apartó la vista de lo que tenía enfrente. Se estaba olvidando de todo lo demás al identificarse a sí mismo, medio especulativamente medio involuntariamente, con los objetos que estaba observando, pensando a qué distancia sería posible cambiar su centro hasta que su propia personalidad no estuviera más fuera de sí mismo que lo que está el paisaje, cuando tuvo la impresión de que algo se movía por la orilla que había enfrente de él, detrás de una hilera de sauces, y le hizo volver su atención hacia allí. Al primer momento tuvo un súbito presentimiento acerca de la figura que se movía; y ahora podía observar su pequeño rostro bañado por los últimos rayos de luz. Temió asustarla con un movimiento repentino y la observó atentamente sin moverse. Ella miró a su alrededor, como si quisiera reunir valor a partir de su aparente soledad, escondió su sombrero entre los sauces, e inmediatamente se quitó su abrigo de lana. Entonces se sentó y hundió deliberadamente su abrigo en el agua, manteniéndolo por unos breves momentos, y recuperándolo a continuación con cierto esfuerzo, a la vez que se levantaba mientras lo hacía. Por entonces Deronda estaba seguro de que ella pretendía cubrirse con él a modo de mortaja; así que ya no podía entretenerse ni un momento y no tenía sentido pensar que podía asustarla. Se incorporó y tomó su remo para navegar hacia ella; por suerte su posición quedaba un poco por debajo de la de él. La pobre, sobrecogida al ser descubierta desde la otra orilla, se metió de nuevo en el agua con su abrigo, aunque con medio cuerpo fuera. Se agachó y se tapó la cara como si todavía tuviera una débil esperanza de no haber sido vista, y que el barquero estuviera viniendo hacia ella por casualidad. Pero él enseguida se acercó, amarró su bote en la orilla y le habló de forma muy amistosa:

—No tenga miedo… usted es infeliz. Le ruego confíe en mí… dígame qué puedo hacer para ayudarla.

Ella alzó la cabeza y le miró. La cara de él daba ahora a la luz, y ella le reconoció. Pero durante unos momentos permaneció en silencio, y se

observaron como ya lo habían hecho anteriormente el uno al otro. Al fin, ella dijo con voz suave y dulce, en un acento tan marcado que parecía extranjero, aunque no lo era:

—Ya le he visto antes… —y luego añadió, distraída, tras una pausa—: «nella miseria».

Deronda, sin entender la conexión, supuso que se hallaba debilitada por el dolor o el hambre.

—¿Era usted, el que cantaba? —Continuó, dudando—: «Nessun maggiore dolore»… —A Deronda le pareció que las meras palabras, pronunciadas en ese tono tan dulce, recobraban la melodía.

—Ah, sí —dijo, comprendiendo—. A menudo lo canto. Pero me temo que se va a lastimar permaneciendo aquí. Permítame llevarla en mi barca a algún sitio más seguro. Y ese abrigo mojado, deje que lo coja.

No quiso cogérselo sin su consentimiento para no asustarla. Incluso ante sus palabras, temió que ella se encogiera y agarra aún más fuertemente el abrigo. Pero sus ojos permanecían fijos en los de él con una pregunta en su mirada mientras dijo:

—Parece usted bueno. Tal vez sea el designio de Dios.

—Confíe en mí. Deje que la ayude. Moriría antes de permitir que le ocurriera nada malo.

Ella se levantó, primero escurriendo el abrigo mojado y luego dejándolo caer al suelo —era demasiado pesado para sus brazos cansados—. Su pequeño cuerpo femenino, mientras juntaba sus delicadas manos heladas sobre su cintura y daba un paso atrás la vez que adelantaba su cabeza para no dejar de verle, era indescriptiblemente conmovedor.

—¡Santo Dios! —Las palabras se le escaparon a Deronda en un tono tan bajo y solemne que parecían como una oración revelada inconscientemente. La inquieta impresión que le estaba produciendo esta chica abandonada llegó a tocarle su fibra sensible, relacionada con su profundo interés en el destino de las mujeres; «tal vez mi madre fue como ella». Su antigua idea le vino ahora con un nuevo ímpetu de sentimientos entremezclados, y provocó la exclamación por la que tanto en el este como en el oeste se ha concentrado durante siglos el sobrecogimiento ante la calamidad inexorable.

Parece que las palabras pronunciadas en voz baja dieron una especie de consuelo a la oyente: se acercó al bote y Deronda le ofreció la mano, esperando ahora que ella le dejaría ayudarle a entrar en él. Ya había puesto su

pequeña mano en la suya, que se cerró sobre la de ella, cuando algo la hizo cambiar de idea, y retirándose dijo:

—No tengo adónde ir, no tengo parientes en toda esta tierra.

—La llevaré a casa de una señora que tiene hijas —dijo Deronda inmediatamente. Sintió una especie de alivio al descubrir que la casa malvada y los amigos crueles de los que se imaginó que huía no estaban por ahí. Pero ella todavía dudaba, y dijo con más timidez que nunca:

—¿Trabaja usted para el teatro?

—No, no tengo nada que ver con el teatro —dijo Deronda con voz firme. Y añadió suplicante—: la dejaré en un lugar completamente seguro enseguida; con una señora, una buena mujer; estoy seguro de que será amable con usted. No perdamos más tiempo: se va a poner enferma. La vida todavía puede sonreírle. Hay buena gente, hay mujeres buenas que pueden cuidar de usted.

Ya no volvió a retroceder, sino que embarcó con facilidad, como si estuviera acostumbrada a ello, y se sentó sobre los cojines.

—¿Tiene usted algo con lo que cubrirse la cabeza? —dijo Deronda.

—¿Mi sombrero? —(Se llevó las manos a la cabeza)—. Está escondido entre los arbustos.

—Lo encontraré —dijo Deronda, desaprobando con la mano su intención de levantarse—. La barca está fijada.

Saltó, encontró el sombrero, y levantó el abrigo empapado, retorciéndolo y lanzándolo al final del bote.

—Debemos llevarnos el abrigo, para evitar que nadie que haya podido verla piense que se ha ahogado —dijo alegremente, mientras entraba de nuevo en la barca y le entregaba su viejo sombrero—. Me hubiera gustado tener alguna otra prenda que ofrecerle que mi propio abrigo. ¿Le importaría ponérselo sobre los hombros mientras estemos en el agua? Es algo que suele hacerse cuando la gente regresa tarde y no tiene suficiente con que abrigarse —le acercó el abrigo con una sonrisa, que fue respondida con otra débil sonrisa melancólica mientras aceptaba el abrigo, y se lo puso con cuidado.

—Tengo algunas galletas, ¿le apetecen? —dijo Deronda.

—No, no puedo comer. Y me queda algo de dinero para comprar pan.

Él comenzó a remar sin hacer más comentarios, y continuaron rápidamente durante varios minutos sin hablar. Ella no le miraba a él, sino a los remos, inclinándose hacia delante en una posición de reposo, como si estuviera empezando a sentir la comodidad del calor que volvía y la

perspectiva de la vida en lugar de la de la muerte. El crepúsculo avanzaba; ya no quedaba nada de esa luz roja y las diminutas estrellas iban dando respuesta una tras otra. La luna se elevaba, aunque aún costaba verla al hallarse por detrás de los árboles y los edificios. No había suficiente luz como para que pudiera distinguir la expresión de sus rasgos o de su mirada, pero estos se presentaban ante él sin ninguna duda —unos rasgos y una mirada que parecían haber dado un significado pleno a ese rostro—. Entre sus temores, uno era el dominante: la primera impresión que tuvo acerca de ella, que no estuviera bien de la cabeza, no se había disipado del todo: la intención del suicidio era incuestionable y añadía un sentido diferente a cualquier otro signo sospechoso. Estaba ansioso por retomar la conversación, pero se abstuvo, deseando alentar así cierta confianza para que la indujera a hablar a ella primero. Al final, fue ella quien habló:

—Me gusta escuchar el sonido del remo.

—A mí también.

—Si usted no hubiera venido, ahora estaría muerta.

—No soporto que hable de eso. Espero que nunca lamente que haya venido.

—No veo por qué tengo que estar contenta de seguir viva. El *maggiore dolore* y la *miseria* han durado más que el *tempo felice*. —Hizo una pausa y luego continuó como en ensueño—: *Dolore, miseria,* creo que estas palabras están vivas.

Deronda estaba en silencio: hacerle preguntas parecía una libertad injustificable; no quería parecer que reclamaba la autoridad de un benefactor o que fuera a tratarla con poco respeto debido a su sufrimiento. Ella continuó divagando:

—No pensé que fuera malo. La muerte y la vida son la misma cosa ante el Eterno. Sé que nuestros padres quitaban la vida a sus hijos y luego se la quitaban a sí mismos para mantener pura su alma. Es lo que pretendía. Pero ahora se me ordena vivir. No veo cómo voy a poder hacerlo.

—Encontrará amigos. Yo se los encontraré para usted.

Ella sacudió la cabeza y dijo tristemente:

—No a mi madre ni a mi hermano. No los puedo encontrar.

—¿Es usted inglesa? Debe serlo, hablando tan bien el inglés.

Ella no respondió inmediatamente, sino que miró de nuevo a Deronda, haciendo un esfuerzo por verle a través de la escasa luz. Hasta ahora, había estado mirando los remos. Tenía la sensación de estar medio consciente, y se

preguntaba qué parte de sus impresiones formaban parte de un sueño y cuáles de la realidad. El aislamiento en la aflicción había entumecido su sentido de la realidad, y se le escabullía continuamente la capacidad de discernir entre lo externo y lo interno. Su mirada reflejaba una falta de seguridad inconmensurable, como la que debía tener la abandonada en el desierto ante la visión angélica antes de saber si su mensaje era de enojo o de compasión.

—¿Quiere saber si soy inglesa? —dijo al fin, al mismo tiempo que Deronda enrojecía nerviosamente ante esa mirada que aunque apenas la veía, la sentía profundamente.

—No quiero saber nada salvo lo que usted quiera contarme —dijo, todavía intranquilo temiendo que su mente fantaseara—. Tal vez no sea conveniente que hable.

—Sí, se lo contaré. He nacido inglesa. Pero soy judía.

Deronda no dijo nada, y se preguntó cómo no se le había ocurrido antes, pues cualquiera que hubiera visto los delicados rostros de las chicas españolas habría adivinado enseguida que eran españolas.

—¿Me desprecia por ello? —dijo entonces en voz baja, con una tristeza que penetraba como el grito de una pequeña criatura asustada.

—¿Por qué debería hacerlo? —dijo Deronda—. No soy tan estúpido.

—Sé que muchos judíos son malos.

—También lo son muchos cristianos. Pero creo que no sería justo que me despreciara usted por ello.

—Mi madre y mi hermano eran buenos. Pero nunca los encontré. He recorrido un gran camino… desde el extranjero. Estoy huyendo: pero no puedo contarle más… no puedo hablar de eso. Pensé que encontraría a mi madre otra vez… Dios me iba a ayudar. Pero me desesperé. Esta mañana cuando se hizo de día, sentí una palabra que resonaba en mi interior: ¡Nunca! ¡Nunca! Pero ahora… empiezo… a pensar… —sus palabras eran interrumpidas con sollozos cada vez más fuertes—. Se me ordena vivir… quizás vamos hacia ella.

Rompió a llorar y escondió su cabeza entre las rodillas. Él esperaba que este llanto pasional consolara su excitación. Mientras, se iba imaginando mentalmente con mucho embarazo cómo iba a presentarse con ella en Park Lane, el rumbo que había escogido irreflexivamente al principio. No había nadie más amable y dulce que Lady Mallinger; pero no era muy probable que estuviera en casa; y tenía la estremecedora sensación de ser como un lacayo que se fijara en esta imagen femenina delicada y apenada, de aspecto

deslumbrante, y tal vez de maneras sospechosas de criada y ama de llaves que podían asustar peligrosamente a quien estuviera en un estado de susceptibilidad. Pero no iba a llevarla a cualquier otro refugio que no fuera una casa que conociera: tenía demasiados temores sobre el desenlace de la aventura que le había acarreado una responsabilidad tanto más pesada por la fuerte y agitada impresión que la criatura de aspecto infantil le había producido. Pero se le ocurrió otro recurso: podía aventurarse a llevarla con la señora Meyrick, a su pequeña casa en Chelsea, donde había estado suficientes veces desde su regreso del extranjero para confiar que allí podía apelar a corazones generosos, con una presteza romántica a creer en la necesidad inocente y ayudarla. Afortunadamente Hans Meyrick estaba fuera en Italia, y Deronda se sintió aliviado de presentarse con su carga en una casa donde sería recibido por una figura maternal de refinamiento cuáquero, y por tres chicas que apenas conocían nada malo excepto lo que habían aprendido en los libros de Historia y en los dramas, y asociarían de inmediato una judía encantadora con la Rebecca de *Ivanhoe*[88], además de pensar que todo lo que hicieran por petición de Deronda sería como hacerlo a su ídolo, Hans. Una vez que le vino a la mente la casa de Chelsea, Deronda ya no dudó.

El trayecto en coche, tras la calma en el agua, parecía que iba a ser más largo. Por suerte, la chica había permanecido tranquila desde que rompió a llorar, y se rindió como una chiquilla cansada. Cuando estuvieron en el coche, se sacó el sombrero e intentó reposar la cabeza, pero el traqueteo no le dejaba descansar: aun así echó una cabezada, cambiando de lado a intervalos la postura de su dulce rostro.

«Son demasiado buenas para temer cualquier cosa por acogerla», pensó Deronda. Su persona, su voz, su aspecto exquisito, constituían un atractivo suficiente para inspirar ternura. Aunque, ¿cuál había sido la historia que la había dejado en esta situación? Iba a pedir un favor extraño: pedir cobijo para esta chica sin hogar. Entonces le vino a la cabeza la bella historia que Plutarco cuenta en alguna parte de las mujeres délficas: cómo cuando las ménades, cansadas por sus paseos con sus antorchas, se tumbaron para dormir en la plaza del mercado, y vinieron las matronas y permanecieron a su lado velando su sueño; entonces, cuando despertaron, las abastecieron con ternura y las condujeron con seguridad a su propia comarca. Podía confiar en las mujeres hacia las que se dirigía por tener corazones tan buenos.

Deronda se sintió crecer esa noche y entrar en una nueva fase al haber encontrado una vida a la que había, tal vez, salvado; pero ¿cómo estar seguro

que arrebatar a una vida de la muerte era salvarla? El momento en que se encuentra a un semejante está a menudo tan mezclado de dudas y de alegrías como lo está el de encontrar una idea.

Capítulo 18

> La vida es una madre dispar: a veces se engalana
> con sus plumas y brillantes, sube por escaleras de mármol
> con la cabeza bien alta, sin siquiera volver su mirada
> hacia el ayudante que la atiende; otras veces se viste
> con harapos y reside en callejuelas sombrías, respira ginebra caliente,
> y grita entre los disturbios de indigentes.
> Pero ella fue parar a una madre comedida, pulcra y virtuosa,
> con alegres pensamientos matutinos y una gran capacidad
> para hallar mucho en lo poco.

LA CASA DE LA SEÑORA MEYRICK NO ERA RUIDOSA: EL VESTÍBULO DE ENFRENTE daba al río, y la parte trasera a los jardines, de forma que aunque ella estuviera leyendo en voz alta a sus hijas, podía dejar abierta la ventana para refrescar el aire de la doble habitación en la que una lámpara y dos candelas ardían. Las candelas estaban en una mesa aparte para Kate, que estaba dibujando ilustraciones para un editor; la lámpara no era solo para la lectora sino también para Amy y Mab, que estaban bordando cojines lisos para «el gran mundo».

Desde afuera, la casa parecía muy estrecha y andrajosa; la brillante luz que se colaba a través de la persiana holandesa mostraba el marco de la ventana pasado de moda; pero es de gran agrado saber que muchos de esos pequeños espacios de paredes raídas que hay en nuestra brumosa ciudad de Londres han sido, y todavía son, las casas de una cultura totalmente libre de la vulgaridad, puesto que la pobreza ha hecho de todo lo que tuviera que ver con la ostentación una cuestión impersonal, y ha reducido todos los grandes espectáculos del mundo simplemente a uno solo, en el que no hay rivalidad mezquina ni la lucha engreída de cuando se consigue poseer algo.

La de los Meyrick era una casa de ese tipo; y todas estas mujeres se aferraban a esta casa particular porque su interior estaba repleto de objetos siempre en el mismo sitio, que para la madre eran recuerdos de su tiempo de casada, y para las jóvenes parecía una parte de su mundo tan indiscutiblemente necesaria como las estrellas de la Osa Mayor que se veían desde las ventanas traseras. La señora Meyrick se había privado de muchas otras cosas para poder mantener ciertos gravados muy estimados por su marido; y los estrechos espacios de las paredes sostenían una pequeña historia

en escenas y titulares que los niños habían aprendido de memoria. Las sillas y las mesas eran también viejos amigos que no cambiarían por nuevos. Pero en estas dos pequeñas estancias en las que no había muebles por los que un vendedor hubiera pagado algo excepto los grabados y el piano, había espacio y material para una vida amplia y selecta, abierta a las más altas creaciones en música, pintura y poesía. No sé si en los tiempos de mayor carestía, antes de que a Kate se le pagara por su trabajo, estas damas habían tenido siempre una sirviente que les encendiera las luces y les barriera sus dormitorios; pero eran quisquillosas en algunas cosas, y no podían creer que la educación de las damas del mundo moderno estuviera tan envuelta de ese egoísmo tosco, esas disputas mezquinas y ese lenguaje coloquial como nos las representan en lo que se ha llegado a denominar «fotografías literarias». Las Meyrick tenían sus pequeñas rarezas, parte de la excentricidad que provenía tanto por parte de la madre como del padre, siendo sus mentes como casas medievales con escondrijos y boquetes inesperados, escalinatas y miradores imprevistos.

Pero la madre y las hijas estaban unidas por un triple lazo: el amor familiar; la admiración por el trabajo impecable, la mejor acción; y la diligencia continua. El deseo de Hans de gastar algo de dinero para hacer más lujosas sus vidas había sido rechazado por todas ellas, y así, tanto ellas como él se habían librado de lamentarse de una conquista que se veía amenazada: su preferencia por el arte antes que la seducción de unos ingresos seguros, una conquista que en el futuro le obligaría a dejar su beca. Todos podían permitirse reírse de sus caricaturas al estilo Gavarni[89] y no culparle por seguir su inclinación natural a la que, por su altruismo e independencia, no se habían opuesto. Era suficiente para ellas continuar como siempre, solo le pedían ir a la ópera (al corredor) cuando Hans venía de visita a casa.

Viendo el grupo que hacían esta noche, uno apenas podía desear que cambiaran su modo de vida. Todas ellas eran igualmente menudas, en proporción con las habitaciones en miniatura. La señora Meyrick estaba leyendo en voz alta un libro en francés: era una pequeña mujer llena de vida, medio francesa, medio escocesa, con una bella forma de articular sus palabras que facilitaba la comprensión para el oyente. A pesar de no tener todavía cincuenta años, su pelo rizado, cubierto por una gorra cuáquera, era mayoritariamente canoso, pero sus cejas eran tan oscuras como los brillantes ojos situados bajo ellas; su vestido negro, casi como la sotana de un clérigo con su hilera de botones, concordaba a la perfección con su impecable figura, apenas de cinco pies de altura. Las hijas eran como la madre, salvo que Mab

tenía el pelo rubio y la complexión de Hans, con unas cejas irregulares y abultadas y otras curiosidades que recordaban al hermano. Todo lo que se refería a ellas era compacto, desde los rulos firmes de sus cabellos, sujetos hacia atrás *à la Chinoise*[90], hasta sus faldas grises en puritana disconformidad con la moda, que en esa época habría pedido que cuatro circunferencias femeninas llenaran todo el espacio libre en la sala de enfrente. Las cuatro, si hubieran sido figuras de cera, podían haber sido empaquetadas fácilmente en un baúl de viaje moderno de una dama. Sus rostros parecían estar dispuestos para la conversación, como si sus mentes hubieran sido abiertas como una castaña y mostraran completamente su interior. Lo único que tenía su propia personalidad en la sala era Hafez, el gato persa, en equilibrio estable sobre el lomo de cuero oscuro de una silla, y que abría sus largos ojos de vez en cuando para comprobar que los demás animales no se comportaran mal.

El libro que la señora Meyrick tenía ante ella era la *Histoire d'un Conscrit*[91] de Erckmann-Chatrian. Acababa de terminar de leerlo en voz alta, y Mab, que había dejado caer su trabajo al suelo mientras alargaba su cabeza hacia delante y fijaba sus ojos en la lectora, exclamó:

—Creo que es la historia más bella del mundo.

—¡Seguro, Mab! —dijo Amy—. Es la última que has oído. Cada cosa que te gusta es siempre lo mejor.

—Apenas se puede considerar una historia —dijo Kate—. Es un trozo de historia que se nos muestra con un gran telescopio. Podemos ver los rostros de los soldados: no, es más que eso, lo podemos oír todo, casi podemos escuchar los latidos de su corazón.

—No me importa cómo lo llames —dijo Mab, sacándose el dedal—. Llámalo un capítulo del Apocalipsis. Me hace desear cosas buenas, cosas grandes. Me hace sentir tan apenada por todo el mundo. Me hace sentir como Schiller[92], quisiera coger al mundo en mis brazos y besarlo. En su lugar, te besaré a ti, mamaíta. —Y abrazó el cuello de su madre.

—Siempre que estás de este humor, Mab, arruinas tu trabajo —dijo Amy —. Estaría bien que acabaras tu cojín sin ensuciarlo.

—¡Oh… oh… oh! —gimió Mab, mientras se inclinaba para recoger su trabajo y su dedal—. Ojalá tuviera a tres reclutas heridos para cuidar de ellos.

—Derramarías sus medicinas mientras les hablas —dijo Amy.

—¡Pobre Mab! No seas tan dura con ella —dijo la madre—. Dame el bordado, hija. Prosigue con tu entusiasmo y yo continuaré con la amapola

rosa y blanca.

—Bueno, *ma,* creo que aún eres más mordaz que Amy —dijo Kate, mientras volvía la cabeza para fijarse en su dibujo.

—¡Oh… oh… oh! —gritó Mab de nuevo, levantándose y estirando los brazos—. Ojalá sucediera algo maravilloso. Algo así como el diluvio. Las aguas de las profundidades desbordadas, y las ventanas del cielo abiertas. Voy a sentarme y a practicar las escalas.

Mab estaba abriendo el piano mientras las demás se reían por este desenlace, cuando un coche se paró ante la casa y acto seguido se produjo una breve llamada en el picaporte de la puerta.

—¡Vaya! —dijo la señora Meyrick, levantándose—, son más de las diez, y Febe[93] se ha acostado. —Salió de la sala apresuradamente dejando la puerta abierta.

—¡Señor Deronda! —Las chicas pudieron oír esta exclamación a su madre. Mab juntó las manos diciendo en un susurro elevado—: ¡Estad atentas! Algo va a pasar. —Kate y Amy dejaron su trabajo sorprendidas. Pero el tono de la respuesta de Deronda fue tan bajo que no pudieron oír sus palabras, y la señora Meyrick inmediatamente cerró la puerta de la sala.

—Sé que estoy apelando a su bondad de un modo extraordinario —continuó Deronda, tras explicarse brevemente—, pero puede usted imaginarse lo desasistido que me encuentro con una joven criatura como esta en mis manos. No podía ir con ella ante extraños, y en su estado nervioso me da pavor llevarla a una casa llena de sirvientes. He confiado en su misericordia. Espero que no considere este acto injustificable.

—Al contrario. Me ha honrado al confiar en mí. Veo su dificultad. Por favor, éntrela. Iré y prepararé a las chicas.

Mientras Deronda volvía al coche, la señora Meyrick volvió de nuevo a la sala de estar y dijo:

—Aquí tenéis a alguien a quien cuidar en lugar de vuestros reclutas heridos, Mab; una pobre chica que iba a ahogarse en su desespero. El señor Deronda la encontró justo a tiempo para salvarla. La ha llevado en su bote, y ya no sabía que más podía hacer para que estuviera segura, así que ha confiado en nosotras y la ha traído hasta aquí. Parece ser judía, pero bastante refinada, dice, pues tiene nociones de italiano y de música.

Las tres chicas, sorprendidas y expectantes, se acercaron y permanecieron cerca unas de otras sabiendo, sin decirlo, que todas sentían lo mismo ante esta

llamada a su compasión. Mab parecía embargada por el respeto, como si esta respuesta a su deseo fuera algo sobrenatural.

Mientras tanto, Deronda se había acercado a la puerta del coche, donde el pálido rostro asomaba con curiosidad expectante, y dijo:

—La he traído a casa de unas de las personas más amables del mundo: hay hijas como usted. Es un hogar feliz. ¿Me permite que se las presente?

Ella se apeó obediente, poniendo su mano en la suya y olvidando su sombrero; y cuando Deronda la condujo a la plena luz de la sala donde las cuatro mujercitas la estaban esperando de pie, la imagen que proyectó habría conmovido a cualquier sensibilidad mucho más fría que las suyas. Al principio, estaba un poco deslumbrada por la repentina luz, y antes de concentrar su mirada, Deronda puso su mano en la de la madre. Por dentro se alegraba de que las Meyrick fueran tan pequeñas: la cabeza de rizos oscuros era la más alta entre ellas. La pobre vagabunda no podría tener miedo de estos amables rostros tan cercanos al suyo; y se puso a observar a cada una de ellas mientras la madre decía:

—Debes estar rendida, pobre chica.

—Cuidaremos de ti, te reconfortaremos, te querremos —gritó Mab, que no pudo refrenarse por más tiempo, cogiendo cariñosamente la pequeña mano derecha entre las suyas. Esta calurosa bienvenida caló hondo en la desconcertada chica: se retiró un poco hacia atrás para ver mejor los cuatro rostros que tenía ante ella, cuya buena voluntad se veía reflejada en ella, no en una sonrisa, sino en ese cambio indefinido que nos dice que la ansiedad está dando paso a la complacencia. Por un momento, elevó la vista hacia Deronda, como si fuera a reconocer toda esta compasión en él, y luego dirigiéndose de nuevo hacia la señora Meyrick, dijo con más entereza en su tono que lo que él había oído hasta entonces:

—Soy extranjera. Soy judía. Podía usted haber pensado que yo era mala.

—No, estamos seguras de que eres buena —intervino Mab.

—No pensamos nada malo de ti, querida. Estarás segura con nosotras —dijo la señora Meyrick—. Ahora ven y siéntate. Tienes que comer algo y luego ir a descansar.

La extranjera miró de nuevo en Deronda, el cual dijo:

—¿No tendrá usted más temores con estas amigas? ¿Podrá descansar esta noche?

—Oh, no tengo nada que temer. Claro que descansaré. Creo que estas mujeres son ángeles proveedores.

La señora Meyrick quiso ofrecerle un asiento, pero retirándose de nuevo delicadamente, la pobre chica, que estaba rendida, empezó a hablar como si tuviera escrúpulos de haber sido recibida sin explicar su procedencia:

—Me llamo Mirah Lapidoth. He recorrido un largo camino, por mi cuenta, desde Praga. Hui. Escapé de cosas espantosas. Vine para encontrar a mi madre y a mi hermano en Londres. Fui arrebata de mi madre cuando era pequeña, pero creí que podía encontrarla de nuevo. Tuve problemas, las casas ya no estaban, no pude encontrarla. Ha pasado mucho tiempo desde entonces, y yo no tenía mucho dinero. Por eso estoy angustiada.

—Nuestra madre será buena contigo —dijo Mab—. ¡Mira que madrecita más buena que es!

—Siéntate ya —dijo Kate, adelantando una silla, mientras Amy corrió a por té.

Mirah ya no se resistió por más tiempo, pero se sentó con perfecta elegancia, cruzando sus pequeños pies, con sus manos reposando una encima de la otra sobre su falda, y mirando a sus amigas con plácida reverencia; en esto, Hafiz, que había estado observando la escena con impaciencia, dio unos pasos hacia delante con la cola erecta y se frotó los tobillos. Deronda pensó que era hora de que marchara.

—¿Me permitirá volver de nuevo para saber de ella, quizás mañana a las cinco? —dijo a la señora Meyrick.

—Sí, por favor; para entonces habremos tenido tiempo de conocernos bien.

—Adiós —dijo Deronda, dirigiéndose a Mirah, y ofreciéndole la mano. Ella se levantó mientras se la tomaba, y el momento les recordó a los dos fuertemente el otro momento cuando ella había tomado esa mano extendida. Elevó sus ojos hacia él y dijo con fervor reverencial—: Que el Dios de nuestros padres le bendiga y le libre de todo mal como usted lo ha hecho conmigo. Nunca creí que hubiera un hombre tan bueno. Nunca nadie me había considerado digna de lo mejor. Me encontró usted pobre y miserable, pero me ofreció lo mejor.

Deronda no pudo responder, pero con un adiós silencioso a las Meyricks, marchó a toda prisa.

FIN DEL PRIMER VOLUMEN

Que tu principal terror sea el de tu alma:
allí entre la aglomeración de acelerados deseos
que pisotean a los muertos apoderándose de su botín,
acecha la venganza, sin fundamento, irresistible,
como exhalaciones cargadas de muerte lenta,
y sobre el escuadrón más limpio de recónditas alegrías,
se respira pálida pestilencia.

LIBRO III

Las chicas eligen

Capítulo 19

> Compadezco al hombre que viajando de Dan a Bershabé exclama: «¡Todo es estéril!». Pues indudablemente lo es. Pero también lo es toda la Tierra para quien no sepa cultivar los frutos que esta ofrece.
>
> STERNE, *Viaje sentimental*[94]

DECIR QUE DERONDA ERA ROMÁNTICO SERÍA DAR UNA FALSA IMPRESIÓN DE ÉL; PERO bajo su calma y su aspecto exterior refrenado había un fervor que le hacían encontrar fácilmente la poesía y el romance en los elementos de la vida cotidiana. Y tal vez el mundo está tan lleno como nunca de poesía y de romance, salvo para esas naturalezas flemáticas que sospecho en cualquier edad las habrían considerado como una estúpida forma de pensamiento erróneo. Se pueden encontrar con facilidad tanto en un laboratorio lleno de microscopios como en los vagones de un ferrocarril: lo que las destierra es el vacío de los pasajeros. ¿Cómo podrían todos los aparatos del cielo y de la tierra, desde el más remoto firmamento al tierno pecho de la madre que nos alimenta, significar poesía para una mente que no se conmueve ni siente sobrecogimiento o ternura, que no confraterniza con lo cercano y lo distante?

Para Deronda, el suceso de hallar a Mirah le causó una impresión tan honda como la que pudo producir cualquiera de los sucesos que les sobrevinieron a Orestes o a Rinaldo[95]. Permaneció media noche despierto, rememorando los momentos desde que había reconocido a Mirah en la orilla del río, con la fresca vitalidad que pertenece a los recuerdos emotivos. Cuando tomó un libro para intentar distraer esta reiterativa visión interior, las palabras impresas no eran más que una red por la que lo veía y oía todo tan claramente como antes —veía no solo los sucesos de hacía dos horas, si no lo que podía también haber sido, pues los hechos eran de tal envergadura como para levantar apasionadamente temores y esperanzas—. Algo en su propia experiencia hizo que la búsqueda de Mirah a su madre se instalara con peculiar fuerza en su imaginación. Su primer impulso compasivo fue el de querer ayudarla en su búsqueda: si ciertas personas dadas se hallaban en Londres había formas de dar con ellas —algo tan probable como los experimentos científicos, si se ponía en marcha la maquinaria adecuada—. Pero en este proceder, los sentimientos entremezclados de Deronda, debidos a

haber sufrido una experiencia similar, se propagaron de forma natural en su ansiedad por el caso de Mirah.

El deseo de conocer a su propia madre, o de saber de ella, estaba constantemente cargado de miedo; y al imaginar qué le podría suceder a Mirah, enseguida se le ocurrió que encontrar a la madre y al hermano de los que había sido separada cuando era pequeña podía resultar desastroso. Cuando estaba en la barca dijo que su madre y su hermano eran buenos; pero la bondad podía haber estado principalmente en su propia inocencia ignorante y en sus recuerdos llenos de ilusión, y los diez o doce años desde la separación era tiempo suficiente para que todavía empeorasen las cosas. A pesar de su fuerte tendencia a situarse del lado de los que eran objeto de prejuicios, y en general, de los que se quedaban con la peor parte, nunca había sentido prácticamente interés hacia los judíos, y los hechos que sabía de ellos, bien que caminaran llamando la atención ataviados en finas prendas o que estuvieran escondidos y al acecho en calles oscuras, eran para él, en cualquiera de los casos, de lo más repugnante. Daba por supuesto que los judíos cultos y realizados habían abandonado su religión, y deseaban formar parte de la gente de su tierra natal. Habría considerado injusto despreciar a uno de esos judíos simplemente por su herencia y se habría compadecido de ellos; pero el menosprecio indiscriminado de una raza conlleva generalmente a juzgar erróneamente a un individuo que haya podido ganarse la vida honestamente, y que puede acabar ahorcado como un hijo indigno de Adán. Parece ser que los caribeños, que saben poco de teología, consideran el robo como una práctica peculiarmente conectada con las doctrinas cristianas, y probablemente podrían alegar razones experimentales que sustentasen esta opinión. Deronda no se libraba (¿quién puede?) de conocer historias desagradables de las características y las profesiones de los judíos; y aunque una de sus reivindicaciones favoritas era discernir entre la historia presente y pasada, era como muchos otros que compartían su reivindicación, pero que no se habían preocupado en sacar más conclusiones de los judíos actuales que las que ya sabían: que mantenían las virtudes y los vicios de una raza largamente oprimida. Pero ahora que la nostalgia de Mirah le obligó a pensar en los detalles con más detenimiento, se le presentaron imágenes muy desagradables de lo que podía encontrar en esa judía de mediana edad y en su hijo. Es cierto que la fineza exquisita y el encanto de la pequeña criatura predisponían a favor de sus parientes inmediatos, pero había que esperar para saber más: tal vez a través de la señora Meyrick, cuando pudiera reunir indicios orientadores

de los propios labios de Mirah. Su voz, su acento, sus miradas, toda la dulce pureza que la revestía como una prenda consagrada le hizo desistir más aún, de asociarla, ya fuera de una forma ideal o práctica, con cualquier cosa que fuera odiosa o contaminante. Pero estas finas palabras con las que fumigamos u ofuscamos los hechos desagradables no son el lenguaje con el que pensamos. El pensamiento de Deronda continuó forjando imágenes de lo que podría pasar: se vio a sí mismo guiado por algún guía oficial hacia una calle lúgubre, en la que entraba a través de una puerta medio rota y veía a una mujer de visión muy aguda, de cabeza dura, y sin lavar, regateando el precio de la última alhaja de una chica hambrienta; o en algún otro barrio, tanto más horrendo por ser aún más pequeño, se encontraba frente al aliento de un joven judío locuaz y familiar, ansioso por mostrar el conocimiento que tenía de los gustos de los caballeros, y que no era muy exigente con las transacciones que le favorecían —y así sucesivamente según el breve capítulo de su experiencia sobre esto—. Es menester excusarle: su mente no estaba capacitada para toparse espontáneamente con ideas insultantes, o para practicar una forma de ingenio que identifica a Moisés con las tablas de la publicidad; pero justo ahora estaba aterrado, y si los padres de Mirah hubieran sido cristianos, la principal diferencia habría sido que sus presentimientos se sostendrían con un conocimiento mayor. Era una costumbre para él relacionar el terror con el parentesco desconocido, y tanto en este caso como en el suyo propio la relación era más que razonable.

¿Pero qué debía hacerse con Mirah? Necesitaba cobijo y protección en todos los sentidos, y todo su instinto de caballerosidad se volcó en hacer hincapié en que cuanto antes y más plenamente pudiera asegurar que otros, además de él mismo, se interesaran por ella, tanto mejor podría satisfacer sus necesidades. No tenía derecho a velar por ella completamente, aunque podía hacerlo; el impacto mismo de la impresión que ella había recibido le hizo pensar que era mejor que ella se viera totalmente independiente de él; y unas vagas impresiones del futuro que trató de rechazar como fantásticas le dejaron en un estado de ansiedad más fuerte que cualquier motivo del que hubiera podido dar razones, y era que cualquiera que observara atentamente sus actos se daría cuenta enseguida de la historia de su relación con Mirah. Había aprendido a odiar el secreto sobre los grandes vínculos y compromisos de su vida —y a odiarlos aún más porque un extraño maleficio de sensibilidades entrelazadas le impedía romper tal secreto—. Deronda se había prometido que, dado que las verdades que hacen desgraciados a los mortales no son

siempre culpa suya, la verdad nunca haría desgraciada a otra persona por su causa. No dejaba de temer por no cumplir su promesa y caer en la filosofía apologética que explica que el mundo no contiene nada mejor que el propio comportamiento de uno.

Por un momento, decidió contar toda la historia de su aventura a Sir Hugo y a Lady Mallinger a la mañana siguiente durante el desayuno, pero la posibilidad de que pudiera revelarse algo completamente nuevo en su próxima visita a casa de la señora Meyrick contuvo este impulso, y finalmente se fue a dormir con la conclusión de que esperaría hasta hacer esa visita.

Capítulo 20

> Apenas puede negarse que incluso en este mundo frágil y corrupto, a veces coincidimos con personas que, en su semblante y aspecto, así como en su modo de vivir, manifiestan un estado tal de virtud, que hacen que nuestro juicio sobre ellos sea más un asunto de intuición que el resultado de un examen continuo.
>
> ALEXANDER KNOX, citado en *La vida de Wesley*, de Southey[96]

MIRAH DIJO QUE HABÍA DORMIDO BIEN ESA NOCHE; Y CUANDO BAJÓ CON EL VESTIDO negro de Mab y su cabello negro que se enrollaba en rizos recién formados que se iban secando gradualmente tras el baño relajante, parecía que empezaba a reconfortarse tras la larga aflicción y el estado de constante vigilancia que habían hecho que su cara perdiera color y formara semicírculos profundos azulados bajo sus ojos. Fue Mab quien le llevó el desayuno y la ayudó a bajar, con cierto orgullo por el efecto producido por un par de zapatillas de fieltro que se había apresurado a comprar al no haber en la casa unos zapatos lo suficientemente pequeños para Mirah, cuyo vestido prestado acababa en los tobillos, exhibiendo la sencilla indumentaria que, amoldándose a sus pies, parecía un adorno tan exquisito como los sépalos de un capullo. Las hebillas del vestido eran como joyas.

—¡Oh, por favor, mamá! —gritó Mab, aplaudiendo y observando los pies de Mirah, mientras entraba en el salón—. Fíjate en las zapatillas, ¡qué bien le quedan! Te digo que es como la Reina Badura[97]: «Dos pies delicados, la obra del Creador protector que todo lo recompensa, la soportan; y me maravilla cómo pueden sostener lo que se encuentra sobre ellos».

Mirah se fijó en sus propios pies de una forma un poco infantil y sonrió a la señora Meyrick, que se decía para sus adentros: «Es difícil imaginar que esta criatura tenga malas intenciones. Pero la gente prudente me aconsejaría que fuera cauta». Le devolvió la sonrisa a Mirah y dijo:

—Me temo que los pies han tenido que soportar su carga demasiado últimamente. Pero hoy descansará y será mi compañera.

—Y te confiará tantas cosas, y yo no las podré oír —refunfuñó Mab, a la que le parecía estar en el primer volumen de una novela exquisita y fuera obligada a perderse algunos capítulos porque tenía que ir a clase.

Kate ya se había ido a dibujar algunos bosquejos por el río, y Amy había salido a hacer unos recados. Era lo que la madre quería, estar a solas con la extranjera, cuya historia debía ser muy triste, pero necesitaba ser contada.

El pequeño salón frontal era tan apropiado como un templo esa mañana. La luz del sol bañaba el río y un aire suave se colaba por la ventana abierta; las paredes mostraban una gloriosa procesión silenciosa de testigos: la Virgen elevándose entre su escolta de querubines, la gran Melancolía con su universo solemne, los Profetas y las Sibilas, la Escuela de Atenas, la Última Cena, grupos místicos donde épocas lejanas confluían en un único momento, los sepulcros de Holbein y los bustos de Rembrandt, la Musa Trágica, chicos del siglo pasado meditando o jugando, poetas italianos… todos estaban allí entre pequeños espacios blancos y negros. La cuidadosa madre que había luchado con sus problemas, y había salido airosa de ellos con cara sonriente, estaba clasificando ovillos de colores para su bordado. Hafiz ronroneaba en la cornisa de la ventana, el reloj de la repisa de la chimenea hacía tic-tac sin prisa, y el ocasional sonido de las ruedas de los carros parecía residir fuera de esa gran quietud general. La señora Meyrick pensó que esta serenidad invitaba de la mejor forma posible a que su compañera comenzara a hablar, y decidió no interrumpirla con ningún comentario. Mirah se sentó enfrente de ella adoptando su postura anterior, con sus manos sobre la falda, los tobillos cruzados, sus ojos al principio barriendo lentamente los objetos que había a su alrededor, pero posándose finalmente con una especie de plácida reverencia sobre la señora Meyrick. Al final comenzó a hablar suavemente:

—Recuerdo la cara de mi madre mejor que cualquier otra cosa; aunque no tenía ni siete años cuando me apartaron de ella, y ahora tengo diecinueve.

—Lo entiendo —dijo la señora Meyrick—. Algunos de los primeros recuerdos son los que más duran.

—Oh, sí, era el primero de ellos. Creo que mi vida empezó despertándome y amando el rostro de mi madre: estaba tan cerca de mí, y sus brazos me rodeaban, y me cantaba. Muy a menudo, mucho, cantaba un himno, y me enseñó a cantarlo con ella; era el primero que cantaba. Siempre cantaba himnos hebreos; y como nunca sabía el significado de las palabras me parecían que solo contenían nuestro amor y nuestra felicidad. Cuando estaba en mi camita y veía de color blanco todo lo que estaba encima de mí, solía inclinarse ante mí interponiéndose enfrente de lo blanco, y cantaba con voz baja y dulce. Puedo volver a ese tiempo en sueños cuando estoy despierta, y a menudo regreso a él al dormirme, mi mano es muy pequeña, la acerco a su

cara, y ella la besa. A veces en mi sueño empiezo a temblar y creo que ambas estamos muertas; pero entonces me despierto y mi mano sigue así, y por un momento apenas sé quién soy. Pero si pudiera ver de nuevo a mi madre, la conocería.

—Debes considerar que habrá algunos cambios tras doce años —dijo la señora Meyrick amablemente—. Mira mis canas: hace diez años mi pelo era de un oscuro brillante. Los días y los meses pasan sobre nosotros como pajaritos sin descanso, y dejan las huellas de sus pies por detrás y por delante; sobre todo cuando son como pájaros con corazones duros: entonces, pisan fuerte.

—Ah, estoy segura que su corazón se ha endurecido al no tenerme junto a ella. Si pudiera sentir su alegría por nuestro reencuentro, le haría saber todo lo que la quiero y la consolaría por todo lo que ha sufrido. Si eso fuera posible, ya nada me importaría. Estaría contenta de haber sobrevivido a mis problemas. Me desesperé. El mundo parecía miserable y malvado; nadie me ayudó para que pudiera soportar sus miradas y sus palabras; me dio la sensación de que mi madre había muerto, y la muerte era el único camino para llegar a ella. Pero entonces, en el último instante, ayer, cuando deseé que el agua me envolviera, y pensé que la muerte era la mejor representación de la compasión, vino a mí la bondad en forma de vida, y confié en la vida. Y, es extraño, pero comencé a sentir esperanzas de que ella viviera también. Y ahora estoy con usted, aquí, esta mañana, la paz y la esperanza han inundado mi vida. No quiero nada; puedo esperar; porque espero, creo y estoy tan tan agradecida. Usted no ha desconfiado de mí, no me ha despreciado.

Mirah habló con fervor contenido, mientras permanecía sentada tan quieta como un cuadro.

—Mucha gente se habría comportado como nosotras, querida —dijo la señora Meyrick, sintiendo que se le empañaban los ojos mientras desviaba la mirada a su trabajo.

—Pero no me topé con ellos ni vinieron a mí.

—¿Cómo fuiste arrebatada de tu madre?

—Ah, ahora iba a llegar a eso. Es espantoso hablar de ello, pero debo contárselo, debo contárselo todo. Creí que solo íbamos a hacer un pequeño viaje; y yo estaba contenta. Había una caja con todas mis pertenencias dentro. Pero subimos a bordo de un barco y nos fuimos alejando de tierra. Entonces me puse enferma; y pensé que nunca acabaría… era mi primer sufrimiento y parecía interminable. Pero al fin llegamos a tierra. No sabía nada entonces, y

creí lo que me dijo mi padre. Me consoló y me dijo que regresaría con mi madre. Pero era América donde habíamos llegado, y tendrían que pasar largos años antes de que regresáramos a Europa. Al principio, preguntaba a mi padre cuando íbamos a volver; e intenté aprender a escribir enseguida, porque quería escribir a mi madre; pero un día, cuando me encontró intentando escribir una carta, me puso sobre su rodilla y me dijo que mi madre y mi hermano estaban muertos; por eso no regresábamos. Recuerdo algo a mi hermano; me llevó una vez; pero no siempre estaba en casa. Creí a mi padre cuando dijo que estaban muertos. Los vi bajo la tierra cuando dijo que estaban allí, con sus ojos cerrados para siempre. Nunca creí que no fuera verdad, y solía llorar cada noche en mi casa un buen rato. Entonces, cuando ella aparecía tan a menudo en mis sueños, pensé que vivía a través de mí a pesar de que no siempre pudiera verla, y eso me consolaba. Nunca temía a la oscuridad, precisamente por eso; y muy a menudo durante el día solía cerrar los ojos y me tapaba la cara e intentaba verla y oírla cantar. Al final logré hacer esto incluso sin cerrar los ojos.

Mirah hizo una pausa, con el rostro lleno de satisfacción, como si estuviera ante su feliz visión, mientras miraba afuera hacia el río.

—Pero tu padre no fue malo contigo, espero —dijo la señora Meyrick, después de un minuto, ansiosa por que retomara el hilo.

—No, me mimó mucho, y se esforzó mucho por enseñarme. Era un actor, y averigüé, después, que el «Coburg» al que decía que iba cuando estaba en casa era un teatro. Pero tenía que ver más con el teatro que con actuar. No siempre había sido actor; había sido profesor, y sabía muchos idiomas. No actuaba muy bien, creo; pero se las apañaba con el escenario, y escribía y traducía obras. Una señora italiana, una cantante, vivió con nosotros bastante tiempo. Ambos me enseñaron; y tenía un maestro, además, que me hizo aprender cosas de memoria y recitar. Trabajé duro, a pesar de ser tan pequeña; y no tenía nueve años cuando debuté por primera vez en el teatro. Podía aprender cosas con facilidad, y no estaba asustada. Pero desde entonces odié nuestro modo de vivir. Mi padre tenía dinero, y vivíamos lujosamente de forma desordenada; siempre había hombres y mujeres yendo y viniendo, había grandes risotadas y discusiones, pavoneos, chasquidos de dedos, burlas, y rostros a los que no me gustaba mirar, a pesar de que muchos me mimaban y acariciaban. Pero entonces recordaba a mi madre. Incluso al principio, cuando no comprendía nada, procuraba escapar de todas estas cosas con pensamientos que nada tenían que ver con ellos; y se me ocurrían muy rápido,

puesto que leía muchas cosas, teatro y poesía, Shakespeare y Schiller, y aprendí lo bueno y lo malo. Mi padre empezó a creer que sería una gran cantante: mi voz estaba considerada como maravillosa para una niña; y disponía de los mejores maestros para mí. Pero era humillante que se jactara de mí, y me mandara cantar para exhibirme en cualquier circunstancia, como si fuera una caja de música. Una vez, cuando tenía diez años, hice el papel de una pequeña chica que había sido abandonada y no lo sabía, y cantaba sentada para sí misma mientras jugaba con las flores. Lo hice sin problemas; pero los aplausos y todos los sonidos del teatro eran odiosos para mí; y nunca me gustaron los elogios que obtenía, porque todo parecía muy frío y hostil: echaba de menos el cariño y la confianza del ambiente en el que había nacido. Me inventé una vida en mis propios pensamientos completamente diferentes a todo lo que me rodeaba: escogí lo que me pareció más hermoso de las cosas que no tenían nada que ver con las obras de teatro, y construí mi mundo fuera de ellas; y era como si un cuchillo afilado estuviera siempre rozándome; llevábamos dos tipos de vida que se confrontaban la una a la otra: había mujeres que parecían buenas y amables en el escenario, y que decían cosas agradables como si realmente las sintieran, y justo después las veía hablando de forma ordinaria y desagradable. Mi padre notaba a menudo mi comportamiento evasivo; y la Signora dijo un día en que había estado ensayando: «Nunca será una artista; no sabe ser más que ella misma. Lo hace muy bien por ahora, pero poco a poco, verás que no actuará mejor que un pájaro cantarín». Mi padre se enfadó y se pelearon. Yo me senté sola y lloré, porque lo que ella había dicho era como el despliegue de un futuro infeliz para mí. Yo no quería ser una artista; pero era lo que mi padre esperaba de mí. Poco después la Signora nos dejó, y una institutriz solía venir y darme lecciones sobre muchas cosas distintas, puesto que mi padre comenzó a estar preocupado por que cantase demasiado; pero todavía actuaba de vez en cuando. Crecieron en mí sentimientos rebeldes y de seguir con ese tipo de vida; pero no sabía adónde ir y temía al mundo. Además, consideraba que estaba mal abandonar a mi padre: temía hacer algo mal, pues pensaba que me sentiría malvada y odiosa ante mí misma, de la misma forma que otros me parecían odiosos ante mí. Tanto duraron estos sentimientos que nunca consideré que mi mundo exterior fuera feliz; y si me volvía malvada perdería mi mundo de pensamientos felices en el que mi madre vivía conmigo. Esa fue mi interpretación infantil durante esos años. ¡Qué largos que fueron!

Mirah agachó la cabeza para meditar de nuevo.

—¿No te enseñaron nada sobre lo que era tu deber? —dijo la señora Meyrick. No quiso decir «religión» al no tener muy claro en que se había convertido la religión hebrea actualmente.

—No, solo que debía hacer lo que deseaba mi padre. No practicaba nuestra religión en Nueva York, y creo que no quería que yo supiese mucho de ella. Pero como mi madre solía llevarme a la sinagoga, y recordaba sentarme en su rodilla mirando a través del enrejado, escuchando los himnos y cantando, yo deseaba ir. Un día, cuando todavía era bastante pequeña, me escabullí e intenté hallar la sinagoga, pero anduve un buen rato perdida hasta que un vendedor ambulante se interesó por mí y me llevó a casa. Mi padre, al darse cuenta de que no estaba, había temido lo peor, y estaba muy enfadado. También yo me había asustado tanto al perderme que tarde mucho tiempo en pensar en aventurarme de nuevo. Pero después que la Signora nos dejara fuimos a parar a unas habitaciones en las que la dueña de la casa era judía y practicante de su religión. Le pedí que me llevara con ella a la sinagoga; y leí sus libros de oraciones y su Biblia, y cuando tuve suficiente dinero le pedí que me comprara mis propios libros, pues estos parecían ser compañeros cercanos de madre: sabía que ella debía haber mirado y repetido las mismas palabras. De esa manera, llegué a saber un poco de nuestra religión y de la historia de nuestra gente, junto con lo que me había enterado por lo que se decía en las obras de teatro y otros libros sobre los judíos y las judías; porque estaba segura que mi madre observaba su religión. Había dejado de preguntar a mi padre sobre ella. Es horrible decirlo, pero había empezado a dejar de creerle. Había averiguado que no siempre decía la verdad, y hacía promesas sin tener la intención de guardarlas; y eso me hizo sospechar que mi madre y mi hermano estaban todavía vivos, a pesar de haberme dicho que estaban muertos. Pues al reflexionar sobre el pasado una y otra vez mientras crecía y sabía más, estaba cada vez más convencida que mi madre había sido engañada, y había esperado vernos de vuelta después de muy poco tiempo; y que mi padre me pusiera en sus rodillas y me dijera que mi madre y mi hermano estaban ambos muertos no me parecía ahora más que una puesta en escena, algo para dejarme tranquila. La crueldad de esa falsedad me caló hondo, y odié toda falta a la verdad a causa de ello. Escribí a mi madre secretamente: conocía la calle, la calle Colman, donde vivíamos, y sabía que estaba cerca del puente Blackfriars y el Coburg, y que nuestro nombre era Cohen por entonces, aunque nuestro padre nos hizo llamar Lapidoth, porque, dijo, era el nombre de sus antepasados en Polonia. Envié mi carta en secreto;

pero no obtuve respuesta, y pensé que ya no había esperanza para mí. Nuestra vida en América no duró mucho más. Mi padre me dijo de repente que íbamos a recoger las cosas e irnos a Hamburgo, lo cual me contentó bastante. Esperaba que pudiéramos arreglárnoslas entre un tipo distinto de personas, y sabía alemán bastante bien, algunas obras de teatro alemanas me las sabía casi por entero de memoria. Mi padre lo hablaba mejor de lo que hablaba el inglés. Tenía treces años entonces, y me consideraba bastante vieja: sabía tanto, pero tan poco. Creo que los demás niños no pueden sentir lo que yo sentí. Había deseado a menudo haberme ahogado cuando me separaba de mi madre. Pero me dispuse a obedecer y a sufrir: ¿qué otra cosa podía haber hecho? Un día, mientras viajábamos en el barco, me vino un nuevo pensamiento. Por esa época no estaba muy enferma y me quedaba bastante en la cubierta. Mi padre actuó y cantó e hizo bromas para divertir a la gente de a bordo, y yo solía oír a menudo comentarios sobre él. Otro día, mientras miraba al mar y nadie reparaba en mí, oí por encima que un caballero decía: «Oh, es uno de esos judíos espabilados, no me extrañaría que fuera un bribón. No hay raza que tenga hombres más astutos ni mujeres más bellas. Me pregunto qué querrá hacer él con su hija». Cuando oí esto, se me metió en la cabeza que la infelicidad de mi vida se debía al hecho de ser judía, y que siempre, al final el mundo pensaría mal de mí y que yo debía aceptarlo, puesto que sería juzgada por ese nombre; y me consoló pensar que mi sufrimiento era parte de la aflicción de mi gente, mi parte del largo lamento que se escucha desde tiempos remotos. Pues si muchos de nuestra raza eran mezquinos y felices en su maldad, ¿qué significaba eso sino más aflicción a soportar por los que eran relacionados con ellos, los cuales eran despreciados por los pecados de sus hermanos? Pero usted no me ha rechazado.

Mirah había cambiado el tono en su última frase, habiéndose dado cuenta de repente que ella, en ese momento, no tenía razones de queja sino de gratitud.

—E intentaremos librarte de que otros te juzguen injustamente, mi pobre niña —dijo la señora Meyrick, que ya había abandonado cualquier intento de continuar con su trabajo, y estaba sentada con las manos cruzadas y mostrando una imagen apenas menos ansiosa de lo que habría mostrado Mab —. Continúa, continúa: cuéntamelo todo.

—Después de esto, vivimos en diferentes ciudades, las que más, Hamburgo y Viena. Retomé de nuevo las lecciones de canto, y mi padre seguía obteniendo el dinero del teatro. Creo que trajo una buena cantidad de

dinero de América: nunca supe por qué nos fuimos. Durante un tiempo, estaba ilusionado con que cantara y me hizo ensayar algunas partes y actuar continuamente. Esperaba ansioso que debutara en la ópera. Pero poco a poco fue haciéndose patente que mi voz no parecía que fuera a ser nunca lo suficientemente potente, no respondía a las expectativas. Mi maestro de Viena me decía: «No fuerces la voz: no será suficiente para el público; es oro, pero un puñado de oro en polvo». Mi padre estaba profundamente decepcionado: no vivíamos tan bien por esa época. Creo que todavía no le he dicho lo que sentía por mi padre. Sabía que me quería y que quería satisfacerme, y eso me hizo temer herirle; pero siempre confundió lo que me agradaba y lo que me hacía feliz. Era parte de su naturaleza tomarse las cosas a la ligera; y pronto dejé de preguntarle por cosas que me importaban en extremo, puesto que siempre se las tomaba a broma. Solía incluso ridiculizar a nuestra propia gente; y una vez en la que había estado imitando sus gestos y su tono al rezar, solo para hacer reír a los demás, no me pude reprimir, pues siempre me quedó clavada una espina de furia en el corazón por mi madre, y cuando estuvimos a solas le dije: «Padre, no deberías imitar a nuestra propia gente ante los cristianos que se ríen de ellos; ¿no estaría mal que yo ridiculizara sus gestos para que ellos se rieran de ti?». Pero él solo se encogió de hombros, rio y me pellizcó la barbilla, y dijo: «No podrías hacerlo, querida». Era esta forma de darle la vuelta a todo, lo que puso una barrera entre mi padre y yo, así que procuré esconderle todo lo que más me importaba. Pues había ciertas cosas de las que no soportaba que se riera; cuando eso sucedía, el mundo me parecía un infierno. ¿Es este mundo y toda la vida que contiene solo una especie de farsa o vaudeville, en el que no se puede encontrar un sentido a la vida? ¿Por qué hay entonces tragedias y grandes óperas, en las que los hombres llevan a cabo tareas difíciles y escogen sufrir? Creo que es absurdo hablar de todas las cosas en broma. Y me di cuenta de que su deseo de verme cantar la mejor música, y participar en la gran ópera era solo para recoger el mejor premio. Mi gratitud por su cariño se esfumó, y el sentimiento más tierno que tuve hacia él fue el de lástima. Sí, algunas veces sentía lástima por él. Había envejecido y había cambiado. Ahora ya no estaba tan lleno de vida. Pensé que se comportaba peor, era menos bueno hacia los demás y hacia mí. De cuando en cuando perdía súbitamente su alegría, y se sentaba en casa en silencio y triste; o bien entraba y se arrojaba al suelo sollozando, igual que he hecho yo cuando he tenido problemas. Si ponía mi mano en su rodilla y le preguntaba: «¿Qué ocurre, padre?», no respondía, pero me cogía del brazo para que lo

pasara por su cuello, y abrazándome a su vez, continuaba llorando. Nunca tuvimos ninguna confidencia entre los dos; pero ¡oh, yo sentía lástima por él! En esos momentos, yo sabía que él debía sentir lo amargo de su existencia, y presionaba mi mejilla contra su cabeza y rezaba. Esos momentos eran los que más me unían a él; y solía pensar cuánto le amó una vez mi madre, ya que, de otra forma, no se habría casado con él.

»Pero pronto vinieron los tiempos de horror. Habíamos estado en Pesth y volvimos a Viena. A pesar de lo que mi maestro Leo había dicho, mi padre me consiguió un contrato, no en la ópera, sino para cantar piezas sueltas en un teatro de barrio en Viena. Él no tenía nada que ver con el teatro por entonces; no comprendía lo que hacía, pero creo que estaba continuamente en una casa de apuestas, aunque él cuidaba siempre de llevarme al teatro. Me sentía muy miserable. Las obras en las que actuaba me resultaban detestables. Los hombres nos salían al encuentro y querían hablar conmigo: mujeres y hombres parecían mirarme con una sonrisa de burla; no era mejor que estar en un horno ardiente. Tal vez yo lo hice peor de lo que era, al no conocer ese tipo de vida; pero las miradas y los rostros fulminantes, y el tener que seguir actuando y cantar lo que odiaba, y luego ver que había gente que se colaba detrás del escenario para espiarme, era todo mucho más terrible que en la época en la que era una niña. Continué con ello; lo hice; me había propuesto obedecer a mi padre y trabajar, pues no veía nada mejor que pudiera hacer. Pero notaba que mi voz se iba debilitando, y sabía que mi actuación no era buena salvo cuando no había que actuar realmente, y podía mostrarme como yo era, dejándome llevar por mis sentimientos. Pero eso ocurría raras veces.

»En medio de todo esto, tuve noticias una mañana de que mi padre había sido llevado a prisión, y me había mandado buscar. No me contó la razón por la que estaba allí, sino que me ordenó ir a una dirección que me dio, para ver a un Conde que podía liberarle. La dirección era de unas salas públicas donde debía preguntar por el Conde, y rogar que viniera adonde mi padre. Le encontré, y le reconocí como a un caballero al que había visto la otra noche por primera vez detrás del escenario. Eso me puso nerviosa, pues recordaba su manera de mirarme y de besar mi mano, pensé que era de mofa. Pero entregué mi mensaje y él prometió ir inmediatamente a ver a mi padre, que vino a casa de nuevo esa misma noche, llevando al Conde con él. Empecé a sentir un miedo horrible a ese hombre, pues no dejaba de importunarme con sus atenciones, sus ojos siempre estaban fijos en mí: vi claro que, cualquier cosa que fuera lo que le rondaba por la cabeza en relación conmigo, por

debajo de ello había desprecio hacia la judía y la actriz. Y cuando se me acercó al día siguiente en el teatro, y me colocó el chal, un gran terror se apoderó de mí; vi que mi padre quería que pareciera contenta. El Conde no era ni muy joven ni muy viejo: sus cabellos y sus ojos eran pálidos; era alto y caminaba pesadamente, y su rostro era serio y grave excepto cuando me miraba a mí. Me sonrió, y su sonrisa me penetró con horror: no podía explicar por qué era mucho peor para mí que otros hombres. Algunos sentimientos son como nuestro oído: vienen como lo hacen los sonidos, antes de que sepamos su razón. Mi padre me habló de él cuando estuvimos a solas, alabándole, diciendo que se había comportado como un buen amigo. Yo no dije nada, porque supuse que había sacado a mi padre de la cárcel. Cuando el Conde vino de nuevo, mi padre abandonó la habitación. Me preguntó si me gustaba estar sobre el escenario. Dije que no, que solo actuaba por obedecer a mi padre. Él siempre hablaba en francés, y me llamaba *petit ange*[98] y cosas parecidas, lo que yo consideraba insultante. Sabía que él pretendía cortejarme, y yo tenía muy claro que un caballero y alguien que no fuera judío no podía amarme sino despreciarme. Pero entonces me dijo que no necesitaba actuar más; quería que le visitara en su hermosa residencia, donde sería la reina de todo. Me costó hablar, me sentía tan furiosa; solo pude decir: “Prefiero quedarme en el escenario para siempre”, y le dejé allí. Saliendo a toda prisa de la sala, vi a mi padre paseando por el pasillo. Se me partió el corazón. Pasé por su lado y me encerré en mi habitación. Me había quedado claro que mi padre había conspirado con ese hombre contra mí. Pero al día siguiente me persuadió para que saliera: dijo que yo lo había confundido todo, y que él me lo iba a explicar; si yo no salía y actuaba y cumplía mi contrato nos arruinaríamos y él se moriría de hambre. Así que continué actuando, y durante una semana o más, el Conde no volvió a acercarse a mí. Mi padre cambió nuestro alojamiento, y permaneció en casa excepto cuando me llevaba al teatro. Comenzó un día a hablar desanimadamente de mi actuación, y dijo que nunca podría continuar cantando en público, que perdería mi voz, y que debía pensar en mi futuro y no interponer mis sentimientos insensatos entre mi fortuna y yo. Dijo: “¿Qué harás? Te desterrarán del canto y tendrás que mendigar a las puertas de la gente. Has tenido una oferta magnífica y deberías aceptarla”. No pude contestar; una sensación de horror se apoderó de mí cuando pensé en mi madre y en él. Pensé por primera vez que no haría mal en abandonarle. Pero al día siguiente me dijo que había cancelado mi contrato en el teatro, y que nos íbamos a Praga. Empezaba a sospechar de todo, y mi

voluntad se iba endureciendo para ir en contra de la suya. Nos llevó dos días hacer las maletas y recoger las cosas; yo contaba que me podía ver obligada a escapar de mi padre, en cuyo caso me vendría a Londres e intentaría, si fuera posible, encontrar a mi madre. Tenía algo de dinero y vendí algunas cosas para conseguir más. Doblé algunas prendas de ropa dentro de un pequeño bolso que pudiera llevar conmigo, y me mantuve alerta. El silencio de mi padre, el haber abandonado el asunto de la oferta del Conde, me hizo estar segura de que había algún plan contra mí. Me temía que su plan fuera llevarme a un manicomio. Vi una vez una imagen de un manicomio, que nunca podré olvidar; se asemejaba mucho a la vida que ya había visto, gente pavoneándose, peleándose, mirándose con malicia, cuyos rostros reflejaban la doblez y perversidad que habitaba en ellos. Solo deseaba verme libre de cualquier tipo de maldad; y rezaba para conseguir ayuda. Había visto lo que eran mujeres despreciadas; y cerré mi corazón a mi padre, pues siempre veía en él al hombre que me hacía estremecer. Pensará usted que no tenía motivos suficientes para sospechar, y tal vez no los tenía, a excepción de mis propias intuiciones; pero me parecía haber tenido una revelación, y todo lo que podía llegar a ser se presentaba ante mí claro y nítido. Si dormía, era solo para ver el mismo tipo de cosas, y apenas podía dormir algo. Durante nuestro viaje estuve siempre alerta. No sé por qué, pero se me presentaba como un suceso real que mi padre me abandonaba repentinamente y me dejaba a solas con el Conde, en una situación de la que no podría escapar. Pensaba que Dios me estaba advirtiendo; la voz de mi madre me hablaba en mi interior. Era oscuro cuando llegamos a Praga, y aunque el extraño conjunto de luminarias estaba encendido era difícil distinguir rostros mientras íbamos en coche por la calle. Mi padre escogió sentarse fuera del carro (siempre estaba fumando por entonces), y yo lo observaba todo a pesar de la oscuridad. De verdad creo que podía ver mejor de lo que jamás fui capaz: la extraña claridad de mi interior parecía haber traspasado al exterior. No era mi costumbre reparar mucho en los rostros y en los cuerpos de las personas de la calle; pero esa noche vi a cada uno de ellos; y cuando pasamos ante un gran hotel me percaté tan solo de un hombre visto de espaldas, que paseaba y que estaba bien iluminado por la luz de las candelas. Lo sabía, antes de que girara la cara y se desplazara hacia la zona de sombra, sabía quién era. Gracias a Dios que le vi. Gracias a Dios. Esa noche no dormí. Me puse encima lo más sencillo que tenía, la capa y el sombrero que he llevado desde entonces; y me senté esperando a las luces y al sonido de la apertura de las puertas. Alguien se levantó temprano, a las

cuatro, para ir a la estación. Eso me dio coraje. Me deslice con mi pequeño bolso bajo la capa, y nadie reparó en mí. Había estado mucho tiempo estudiando la guía de ferrocarriles para aprender el camino de vuelta a Inglaterra; y antes de que saliera el sol estaba montada en el tren hacia Dresden. Lloré de alegría. No sabía si mi dinero duraría, pero confié en que sí. Podía vender las cosas de mi bolso, y los pendientes que llevaba en las orejas, y podía vivir solamente de pan. Mi único temor era que mi padre me siguiera. Pero nunca me detuve. Seguí, y seguí, y seguí, solo comiendo pan de vez en cuando. Cuando llegué a Bruselas me di cuenta de que no tenía suficiente dinero, y vendí todo lo que podía vender; pero sucedió una cosa extraña. Al poner la mano en el bolsillo de mi capa, encontré medio napoleón. Sin dejar de pensar cómo había llegado hasta allí, recordé que en el camino de Colonia había un joven trabajador sentado enfrente de mí. Estaba asustada de todo el mundo, y no quería que nadie me hablara. Al principio intentó hablar, pero cuando vio que yo no quería, desistió. Fue un largo viaje; no comí nada excepto un trozo de pan, y una vez me ofreció algo de la comida que él llevaba, pero la rechacé. Estoy segura que fue él quien puso esa pieza de oro en mi bolsillo. Sin ella, apenas podría haber llegado a Dover, y anduve un buen trecho del camino de Dover a Londres. Sabía que debía tener el aspecto de una chica mendiga y miserable. No quería parecer muy miserable, pues si encontraba a mi madre, la apenaría verme así. ¡Pero qué vana era mi esperanza de que ella estuviera allí para verme venir! Tan pronto como puse un pie en Londres, comencé a preguntar por Lambeth y el puente de Blackfriars, pero estaban muy lejos, y me equivoqué de camino. Cuando al final llegué, pregunté por la calle Colman. La gente negaba con la cabeza. Nadie la conocía. Yo la veía en mi mente: los peldaños de la puerta de nuestra casa, y los blancos azulejos del exterior de las ventanas y el grueso edificio de ladrillos de enfrente de amplias puertas. Pero no había nada así. Al final, cuando pregunte a un comerciante dónde estaban el Teatro Coburg y la calle Colman, dijo: «Oh, señorita mía, todo eso se ha acabado. Han demolido las viejas calles; todo es nuevo». Me di la vuelta, sintiendo como si la muerte hubiera puesto su mano sobre mí. El hombre dijo: «¡Espere, espere, señorita! ¿Qué es lo que quiere de la calle Colman?». Quizás su intención era buena. Pero su tono era tal que no pude soportarlo; ¿y cómo iba a decirle lo que quería? Me quedé paralizada y aturdida de repente. Me sentía muy débil y cansada, pero ¿a dónde podía ir con ese aspecto tan pobre y polvoriento? No llevaba nada conmigo, parecía una mendiga de la calle. Y tenía miedo de

todos los lugares donde podía entrar. Perdí mi confianza. Pensé que me hallaba desamparada. Me parecía haber estado envuelta en una fiebre delirante de esperanza durante todo el trayecto desde Praga: pensé que había recibido ayuda de lo alto, y no hice sino animarme y seguir luchando para encontrar a mi madre; y ahora, me veía en un mundo extraño. Todo el que me viese pensaría mal de mí, y me asociara con un mendigo. Llegué hasta el puente, y desde él, miré a lo largo del río. La gente subía a un barco de vapor. Muchos de ellos parecían pobres, y pensé que sería como un refugio, una forma de huir de las calles: tal vez el barco me llevara adonde pudiera conseguir un poco de soledad. Todavía me quedaban algunos peniques, y compré una hogaza cuando embarqué. Quería tener algo de tiempo y de fuerzas para pensar en la vida y en la muerte. ¿Cómo podía seguir viviendo? Y de nuevo me parecía que, si tenía que encontrar a mi madre, la muerte era el camino hacia ella. Comí, para tener fuerzas para pensar. El barco me dejó en un lugar por el río, no sé dónde, y había avanzado la noche. Encontré unos árboles frondosos apartados de la carretera y me senté bajo ellos para descansar por la noche. El sueño se debió apoderar pronto de mí, y cuando desperté era de día. Los pájaros cantaban, me rodeaba el rocío blanco, estaba congelada de frío y, ¡ay!, me sentía tan sola. Me incorporé y di un paseo siguiendo el río un buen trecho y luego regresé de nuevo. No había ninguna razón para ir a ninguna parte. El mundo a mi alrededor parecía una visión que seguía su curso mientras yo permanecía en pie con mi dolor. Mis pensamientos eran más fuertes que yo: se precipitaron sobre mí y me obligaron a ver toda mi vida desde el principio; desde que me arrebataron de mi madre me había sentido como una niña perdida, tratada y usada por extraños, a los que no les importaba lo que significaba mi vida para mí, sino solo en qué podía serles útil a ellos. Todo parecía haber sido un agotador errar por la vida, llena de soledad, como si hubiera sido forzada a participar en fiestas sin esperanza de alegría para mí. Y ahora era peor. Estaba perdida de nuevo, y me horrorizaba pensar que algún extraño reparara en mí y me dirigiera la palabra. Me aterrorizaba el mundo. Nadie me conocía. Todos me confundirían. Había visto a tanta gente en mi vida que disfrutaban despreciando a los demás, riéndose de su vergüenza. ¿Qué podía hacer? La vida parecía cernirse sobre mí como una barrera de fuego, por todas partes sentía un calor abrasador que me hacía estremecer. La luz del sol desde lo alto me hacía estremecer. Y empecé a pensar que mi desesperación era la voz de Dios mandándome morir. Pero me llevaría mucho tiempo morir de hambre.

Entonces pensé en mi gente, cómo habían sido conducidos de tierra en tierra y habían sufrido, y muchos de ellos habían muerto de miseria en su destierro; ¿era yo la primera? Y en las guerras y las confrontaciones en las que los cristianos habían mostrado su crueldad, nuestros padres habían dado muerte a sus propios hijos y luego se habían quitado la vida ellos mismos; todo para salvarlos de ser falsos apóstatas. Eso hizo que me pareciera correcto que acabara con mi vida; pues la calamidad me había acorralado demasiado, y no veía más salida que por el camino del mal. Pero mi mente peleó consigo misma, pues disputaban cosas contrarias en ella. Sabía que había gente que consideraba que estaba mal adelantar la propia muerte, aunque uno se hallase en medio de las llamas; y mientras me quedaran fuerzas mi deseo era sufrir si realmente tenía que sufrir; si no, ¿dónde residía el mérito de mi vida? No había sido feliz desde los primeros años de vida; cuando amanecía cada mañana solía pensar: «Lo soportaré». Pero antes, siempre tenía algo de esperanza; ahora, la había perdido toda. Anduve errando sumida en estos pensamientos, clamando internamente al Altísimo, del que no podría huir en la muerte más que en vida, a pesar de no tener la suficiente fe como para pensar que Él cuidaba de mí. Parecían abandonarme las fuerzas: muy por debajo de mis gritos, en el fondo, sentía que estaba sola y abandonada. Cuanto más pensaba, más cansada me sentía, hasta que parecía que ya no pensaba nada, sino que era como si el cielo, el río y el Dios Eterno estuvieran en mi alma. ¿Y qué si vivía o moría? Si me tumbaba a morir en el río, ¿era peor que irse a dormir? Allí envié mi alma; me desprendí de mí misma. No podía seguir soportando mis recuerdos. Solo podía sentir lo que había en mi interior: un vivo deseo de poner fin a mi vida de cansancio, que me parecía solo un pequeño dolor ajeno a la gran paz de la que iba a formar parte. Así es como era. Cuando vino la noche y se fue el sol, parecía como si eso fuera todo lo que tenía que esperar. Y me acompañó una nueva fuerza para desear lo que iba a hacer. Ya sabe lo que hice. Iba a morir. Sabe lo que ocurrió; ¿no se lo contó él? Recuperé la fe: no estaba abandonada. ¿Le contó cómo me encontró?

La señora Meyrick no dio ninguna respuesta perceptible, pero apretó sus labios contra la frente de Mirah.

—Es una perla: el barro solo la ha lavado —fue el breve y fervoroso comentario final de la mujer cuando esa noche, cara a cara con Deronda en la

sala de estar trasera, le transmitió íntegramente la historia de Mirah.

—¿Qué opina sobre la búsqueda de su madre? —dijo Deronda—. ¿No le da miedo? Yo tengo mis temores, se lo confieso.

—Oh, yo creo que la madre es buena —dijo la señora Meyrick, con rápida decisión—. O *era* buena. Puede estar muerta, esos son mis temores. Una buena mujer, puede usted estar seguro: se deduce de la bellaquería de su padre. ¿De dónde sacó la niña su bondad? Alguna explicación debía tener.

A Deronda le decepcionó un poco esta respuesta: había buscado una confirmación de su propia valoración, y empezó a poner objeciones. El razonamiento acerca de la madre no servía en cuanto al hermano; y la señora Meyrick admitió que el hermano podía ser una desagradable copia del padre. En cuanto a poner un anuncio público, si el nombre era Cohen, estarían además anunciando dos registros catastrales indefinidos; pero en esto, la señora Meyrick le disuadió, pues la idea de un anunció, que ya se le había mencionado a Mirah, horrorizaba a la pobre chica: estaba convencida que su padre lo vería —siempre lo veía todo en los periódicos—. Estaba claro que había modos más seguros que un anuncio: podían contratar a gente que se dedicara a buscar a personas desaparecidas; pero Deronda intentó persuadir a la señora Meyrick de que era más prudente esperar, antes de encontrar un resultado turbio, o incluso deplorable; sobre todo porque se había comprometido a salir la semana siguiente dos meses al extranjero. Si se realizaba una búsqueda, él quería estar presente, para que la señora Meyrick no se hallara sin ayuda si encontraba cualquier dificultad —suponiendo que ella en su generosidad quisiese continuar cuidando de Mirah—.

—Estaríamos muy celosas de cualquiera que nos arrebatara esa tarea —dijo la señora Meyrick—. Permanecerá bajo mi techo: tenemos la antigua habitación de Hans para ella.

—¿Se contentará ella con esperar? —dijo Deronda, ansioso.

—¡No hay problema en eso! No forma parte de su naturaleza urdir planes o tramar cosas por su cuenta; solo someterse. Dese cuenta de cómo se sometió a su padre. Ella misma se sorprendía de que le costase tanto huir de él. En cuanto a encontrar a su madre, la única idea que tiene ahora es de esperanza: dado que usted llegó a ella para salvarla y nosotras somos buenas con ella, confía en que encontrará a su madre de la misma manera casual. Y cuando ella habla, me doy cuenta de sus sentimientos como si fuera una niña.

La señora Meyrick esperaba que la cantidad que Deronda pusiera en sus manos como provisión para las necesidades de Mirah fuera más elevada de lo

necesario; después de poco tiempo Mirah querría tal vez mantener el mismo nivel que las otras chicas y conseguir cierta independencia. Deronda insistió en que debía tener un buen descanso.

—Oh, sí, no apresuraremos para nada las cosas —dijo la señora Meyrick —. Cuente con ello, la cuidaremos afectuosamente. Si quiere dejarme su dirección en el extranjero, le escribiré para informarle de cómo va todo. No es justo de que nos guardemos nosotras toda la alegría de su salvación. Y, además, quiero imaginar que estoy haciendo algo por usted además de por Mirah.

—Y lo hace con sinceridad. ¿Qué habría hecho yo sin usted anoche? Todo habría ido mal. Le diré a Hans que lo mejor de tenerle por amigo es haber conocido a su madre.

Tras esto, se reunieron con las chicas en la otra sala, donde Mirah estaba sentada plácidamente, mientras las demás le estaban contando lo que sabían del señor Deronda, la bondad que había manifestado hacia Hans, y todas las virtudes que Hans les había dicho de él.

—Kate prende una vela ante su retrato cada día —dijo Mab—. Y yo llevo su firma en una pequeña bolsa de seda negra alrededor de mi cuello para evitar los calambres. Y Amy recita la tabla de multiplicación utilizando su nombre. Todas debemos hacer algo extra en su honor, ahora que nos ha permitido que cuidemos de ti.

—Supongo que es una persona demasiado importante para querer nada —dijo Mirah, sonriendo a Mab, y captando la atención de la seria Amy. ¿Tal vez está en una posición muy elevada en el mundo?

—Tiene un rango mucho más alto que nosotras —dijo Amy—. Está emparentado con grandes personajes. Me atrevería decir que él se sienta sobre sillones de seda que nosotros solo nos atreveríamos a rozar ligeramente.

—Me alegro de que tenga un rango elevado —dijo Mirah, con su habitual impasibilidad.

—¿Ah sí? ¿Y por qué estás contenta por eso? —dijo Amy, algo desconfiada por este sentimiento, al acecho de peculiaridades judías que aún no se habían manifestado.

—Porque antes nunca me habían gustado los hombres de alto rango.

—Oh, el del señor Deronda no es tan alto —dijo Kate—. No necesita evitar que pensemos mal de toda la gente de la nobleza si queremos.

Cuando entró, Mirah se levantó con la misma mirada de reverencia y agradecimiento que le había dirigido la noche anterior: no existía en el mundo

criatura más libre al mismo tiempo de timidez y de atrevimiento. Su entrenamiento teatral no había dejado ninguna huella reconocible; probablemente sus ademanes no habían cambiado mucho desde que representó el papel de chica abandonada a los nueve años; y había crecido en su simplicidad y veracidad como la pequeña semilla de una flor que convierte la confusión casual de su entorno en el molde expreso de su propia belleza. Deronda comprendió que estaba tomando contacto con algo enteramente nuevo para él en la forma de feminidad. Pues Mirah no era tan ingenua como una niña: su experiencia del mal y de las calamidades era mayor y más extraña que la suya propia. Le pareció que debía observarla y escucharla como si hubiera venido de una ribera lejana habitada por una raza diferente a la nuestra.

Pero por esa misma razón, su visita fue breve: con su preocupación habitual de cómo afectaría a los demás su comportamiento, reprimió cualquier signo de curiosidad o de dar por supuesto que tenía derecho a saber todo lo que quisiera de aquella a quien había hecho un favor. Por ejemplo, le habría gustado oírla cantar, pero consideraba que la expresión de tal deseo habría sido una grosería por su parte, puesto que ella no habría podido negarse, mientras que él habría tenido la sensación de tratarla como a alguien a quien le pidieran exhibir sus habilidades al antojo del demandante. Cualquier signo de respeto que pudiera mostrarse hacia una mujer, estaba dispuesto a mostrarlo hacia esta chica. ¿Por qué? Se dio a sí mismo varias buenas razones; pero cualquier cosa que uno haga mediante un fuerte y determinado acto de la voluntad, suele tener un motivo que es difícil expresar con palabras. Algunos actos parecen poco más que imprecaciones que dan un respiro a la prolongada pasión de una vida.

Así que Deronda no tardó mucho en despedirse por los dos meses que esperaba estar ausente de Londres, y en unos pocos días estaba en camino con Sir Hugo y Lady Mallinger hacia Leubronn.

Había llevado a cabo su intención de contarles lo de Mirah. La opinión del baronet era que sin duda era mejor no proseguir con la búsqueda de la madre y del hermano. Lady Mallinger estaba muy interesada en la pobre chica, e hizo notar que había una Sociedad para la Conversión de los Judíos, y que era de esperar que Mirah abrazara el cristianismo; pero al darse cuenta de que Sir Hugo la miraba divertido, pensó que había dicho una tontería. Lady Mallinger se sentía culpable de no haber hecho más que traer hijas al mundo cuando lo que se necesitaba eran hijos, cosa que le hacía ver las aparentes

contradicciones del mundo como fruto de la debilidad de su propia comprensión. Pero cuando estaba desorientada de verdad, solía decirse a sí misma: «Se lo preguntaré a Daniel». La familia tenía suerte de contar con Deronda; y también Sir Hugo, tras proponerse hacer lo mejor para él, había empezado a pensar que la mejor solución sería tener a este sustituto de un hijo siempre cerca de su lado.

Hasta aquí llega la historia de Deronda, hasta lo que él conocía, en el momento de esa visita a Leubronn en la que vio a Gwendolen Harleth en la mesa del juego.

Capítulo 21

> Es un dicho común que el Conocimiento es poder; pero ¿quién ha considerado debidamente o ha disertado sobre el poder de la Ignorancia? El conocimiento construye lentamente lo que la Ignorancia destruye en una hora. El Conocimiento, a través de pacientes y fructuosos siglos, aumenta los descubrimientos y deja constancia de ellos; la Ignorancia, al querer el pan de cada día, enciende un fuego con las anotaciones, y condimenta un asado con las almas chamuscadas de muchas generaciones. El Conocimiento, instruyendo a los sentidos, perfeccionando y multiplicando las necesidades, se transforma en habilidad y hace variada la vida con el nuevo trabajo de seis días; viene la Ignorancia borracha al séptimo día con un tazón de aceite y una cerilla y un sencillo «que no haya», y la creación multicolor se marchita en la oscuridad. Ciertamente, el Conocimiento es poder, pero es un poder refrenado por el escrúpulo, al tener conciencia de lo que debe ser y de lo que puede ser; mientras que la Ignorancia es un gigante ciego al que si se le libera de la cera, convertiría en un deporte agarrar los pilares que sostienen la largamente forjada tela del bien humano, y oscurecería todas los lugares de alegría como la enterrada Babilonia. Y si se mira a la vida por etapas, en el desarrollo de un simple período, ¿quién es el que teniendo una visión práctica no puede ver que el ignorar los verdaderos lazos de los acontecimientos y el utilizar erróneamente los medios por los cuales pueden llegar a forzarse las secuencias —como ese error de intuición que pasa por alto las gradaciones de la distancia, viendo lo que está fuera del alcance como si estuviera a un paso o a punto de cogerlo— precipita al alma equivocada a la destrucción?

ERAN LAS DIEZ Y MEDIA DE LA MAÑANA CUANDO GWENDOLEN HARLETH, TRAS SU tétrico viaje viniendo de Leubronn, llegó a la estación desde la que debía dirigirse en coche a Offendene. No la esperaba ningún carruaje ni ningún amigo, pues en el telegrama que había enviado desde Dover había mencionado un tren más tardío, y al no haber tenido la paciencia de quedarse en una estación de Londres había partido sin imaginarse lo que significaría llegar sin previo aviso a una hora y media de coche de casa, en una de esas estaciones situada no muy cerca de un lugar concreto, sino equidistante de todos. Abandonada, como una mujer solitaria, con sus grandes maletas y obligada a esperar después de llamar a un vehículo desde el farol de tamaño gigante denominado el Hostal de la Línea de Ferrocarriles, Gwendolen sintió que la sucia planta de la sala de espera, el polvoriento decantador con agua estancada, y los textos de grandes letras que la exhortaban a la conversión y al arrepentimiento, eran parte de las tristes expectativas que se abrían por los problemas de su familia; y salió a toda prisa por la puerta exterior mirando hacia el camino y los campos. Pero aquí los mismos rayos del sol parecían melancólicos, pues temblaban las hojas de otoño y la hierba, y el viento

movía las plumas de un gallo y dos gallinas que no paraban de cacarear y que sin duda se habían desprendido de sus pollitos y nos sabían qué hacer con sí mismos. El oficial del ferrocarril también parecía sin recursos, y su porte inocente observando a Gwendolen y sus maletas se volvió intolerable por la forma en que la miraba; sobre todo porque, al ser un hombre nuevo, no la conocía, y debía pensar que no estaba situada en una posición muy alta en el mundo. El vehículo —una vieja y sucia carreta— ya estaba a la vista, y lo estaba preparando tranquilamente un operario de edad. Detalles despreciables estos, para formar parte de una historia; pero sin ellos apenas puede contarse cómo se desarrolla la vida. Continuamente entran con fuerza acumulativa creando una atmósfera que acaba adquiriendo la forma de una teoría o de una explicación. Ni siquiera la filosofía está del todo libre de tales influencias determinantes; y ser abandonado en un lugar tétrico e irrelevante con una sensación de aturdimiento, bien puede llevar a un hombre a una especulación descorazonadora sobre el origen de las cosas y la causa de un mundo en el que un pensador sutil se hallara tan perdido. ¿Cuánto más afectarían estas bagatelas a una joven señorita preparada para estar en sociedad con un gusto quisquilloso, un chal indio sobre su hombro, unas maletas de unos diez pies cúbicos[99] a su lado, y una completa repulsión al nuevo estado de pobreza que su imaginación ya adelantaba? En cualquier caso, impactaron fuertemente sobre la pobre Gwendolen, y contribuyeron a sofocar su resistente espíritu. ¿Qué sentido tenía vivir en medio de apuros, penurias y humillaciones? Esto era el principio de estar de nuevo en casa, y era una muestra de lo que se encontraría.

Este era el tema sobre el que dio rienda suelta a su apatía durante su lento viaje en la incómoda carreta, con una de las grandes maletas oprimiendo al apacible cochero, y la otra atada con una cuerda en el asiento de enfrente. Tenía el pensamiento desde que había salido de Leubronn que la familia iría de nuevo al extranjero; pues estaba claro que les quedarían algunos ingresos —cuando su mamá dijo que no les quedaba nada, no podía referirse en sentido literal—. Ir a un sitio aburrido en el extranjero y vivir pobremente era el triste futuro que la amenazaba: había visto a muchísima gente inglesa pobre en el extranjero, y se vio sumergida en el menospreciado deslustre de sus mal abastecidas vidas, con Alice, Bertha, Fanny e Isabel, todas a su alrededor mostrando su monotonía, mientras ella avanzaba hacia los treinta, y su mamá volviéndose más y más melancólica. Pero ella no iba a dejar someterse ni que la desgracia hiciera con ella lo que quisiese: todavía no había creído del todo

en su desgracia; pero el cansancio, y la aversión hacia la forma miserable en que había llegado habían comenzado a afectarla como un despertar molesto, peor que los desagradables sueños que había sufrido anteriormente. La autosatisfacción con la que había besado su imagen en el espejo se había desvanecido ante la sensación de futilidad por ser cualquier cosa que fuera —encantadora, inteligente, resuelta—, ¿de qué le servía todo eso? Los acontecimientos podían desarrollarse de cualquier forma, y los hombres eran odiosos. Sí, los hombres eran odiosos. Esas breves palabras iban unidas con recuerdos muy vívidos. Pero en estas últimas horas, su significado había cambiado ligeramente. Una cosa es odiar los bienes robados, y otra odiarlos más porque al haber sido robados no podemos utilizarlos. Gwendolen había empezado a estar enojada con Grandocurt por ser lo que le había impedido casarse con él, por ser la causa de su triste suerte actual.

Mas el lento viaje estaba casi llegando a su fin, y el vehículo de madera que se acercaba por la avenida ya estaba a la vista desde las ventanas. Una silueta que apareció bajo el pórtico provocó instantáneamente un nuevo y menos egoísta sentimiento en Gwendolen, y cuando saltó del carruaje vio el querido y precioso rostro con curvas recientes de tristeza en él, se abrazó al cuello de su madre, y por el momento solo sintió la pena con relación al sentimiento de su madre por ellas.

Detrás, por supuesto, estaban las caras tristes de las cuatro chicas superficiales, cada una, pobrecilla —como esas muchas otras hermanas nuestras—, en su mundo particular que no importaba a nadie más que a ellas, pero todas sintiendo que la presencia de Gwendolen de alguna manera refrenaba la desgracia: allí donde estaba Gwendolen, algo interesante tenía que suceder; incluso su apresurada sumisión a sus besos, y su «Ahora marchaos, niñas», llevaban en sí el tipo de consuelo que los débiles encuentran en la decisión y la autoridad. La buena señorita Merry, cuyo aire de abatimiento apacible, hasta entonces inexplicable en una institutriz cariñosamente unida a la familia, estuvo ahora a la altura de las circunstancias, no esperó ningún saludo, sino que se ocupó con las maletas y el pago del cochero; mientras, la señora Davilow y Gwendolen subieron al primer piso deprisa y se encerraron en el dormitorio negro y amarillo.

—No importa, querida mamá —dijo Gwendolen, recogiendo tiernamente con su pañuelo las lágrimas que caían por las mejillas de la señora Davilow —. No importa. A mí no me importa. Haré lo que sea. Seré lo que haga falta.

Las cosas se arreglarán. Parecía peor porque yo estaba fuera. ¡Vamos! Tienes que alegrarte de que esté aquí.

Gwendolen sintió cada una de las palabras de su discurso. Un arrebato de ternura compasiva estimuló toda su capacidad de resolución generosa; y los proyectos de los que estaba segura de que podía sacar adelante y en los que había pensado solo vagamente durante su viaje le vinieron a la mente con nueva determinación. De repente, pareció percibir cómo podía ser «algo». Fue uno de sus mejores momentos, y la apegada madre, olvidando todo lo que había bajo la marea, la miró con una especie de adoración. Y dijo:

—¡Bendita seas, cariño mío! ¡Yo puedo ser feliz si tú puedes!

Pero más tarde durante el día bajó la marea; las viejas rocas deslizantes, los antiguos lugares con malas hierbas reaparecieron. Naturalmente, hubo una merma del coraje cuando la desgracia dejó de ser un mero anuncio, y comenzó a desarrollarse como un grave recluso tiránico. Al principio —una vez finalizó esa horrorosa conducción— todavía era Offendene donde Gwendolen había llegado a casa, y las cosas que había a su alrededor de consecuencia inmediata para ella permanecían todavía allí para asegurarle su tranquilidad personal; la espaciosa quietud de la gran casa maciza mientras descansaba; todas las comodidades de su aseo cuidadas sin problema; y una pequeña bandeja con su comida favorita que le trajeron en privado. Pues había dicho: «Mantén a todos lejos de nosotros por hoy, mamá. Que tú y yo estemos a solas».

Cuando Gwendolen bajó a la sala de estar, fresca como un cisne que viene de sumergir la cabeza en el agua, y se reclinó en los cojines del canapé al lado de su mamá, la desgracia aún no había mostrado su rostro sobre ellas. Se sintió preparada para escuchar cualquier cosa, y empezó en un tono de intención deliberada:

—¿Qué has pensado hacer exactamente, mamá?

—Oh, querida, la siguiente cosa a hacer es marcharse de esta casa. El señor Haynes, por suerte, está tan dispuesto a quedarse con ella ahora como lo habría estado cuando la cogimos. El agente de Lord Brackenshaw va a arreglarlo todo con él de la forma más ventajosa para nosotras: Bazley, ya sabes; para nada un hombre deshonesto.

—No puedo evitar pensar que Lord Brackenshaw podría dejarte seguir aquí sin pagar nada, mamá —dijo Gwendolen, la cual no había utilizado sus talentos para los negocios tanto como para discernir la admiración que suscitaban sus encantos.

—Mi querida hija, Lord Brackenshaw está en Escocia, y no sabe nada de nosotras. Ni tu tío ni yo querríamos solicitarle nada. Además, ¿qué haríamos en esta casa sin sirvientas, y sin dinero para calentarla? Cuanto antes la abandonemos, mejor. No tenemos más que llevarnos nuestras ropas, ya sabes.

—Supongo que te refieres a ir al extranjero, entonces —dijo Gwendolen. Después de todo, era lo que ya había asumido.

—Oh, no, querida, no. ¿Cómo íbamos a viajar? Nunca aprendiste nada de ingresos y gastos —dijo la señora Davilow, intentando sonreír, y poniendo su mano sobre la de Gwendolen mientras añadía, con pena—: lo cual es aún más duro para ti, vida mía.

—¿Pero dónde vamos a ir? —dijo Gwendolen con una nota de dureza. Sintió que le sobrevenía una nueva ola de temor.

—Todo está decidido. Nos aprovisionaremos con algún mueble de la rectoría, todo lo que sobre. —La señora Davilow dudó. Temía menos la realidad que el impacto que podía causar en Gwendolen, la cual miraba con tensión expectante, pero en silencio.

—Es a la cabaña de Sawyer donde iremos.

Al principio Gwendolen permaneció callada, palideciendo de ira —una ira justificada, en su opinión. Luego dijo con altivez:

—Eso es imposible. Hay que pensar algo más que eso. Mi tío no lo permitirá. Yo no me someteré a eso.

—Mi dulce niña, ¿en qué otra cosa podríamos pensar? Tu tío, estoy segura, es tan amable como puede; pero él mismo tiene problemas: tiene que levantar a su familia. ¿Eres capaz de entenderlo? Recuerda que no tenemos nada. No tendremos absolutamente nada salvo lo que él y mi hermana nos den. Han sido tan prudentes y nos han ayudado tanto como han podido, pero ahora tenemos que intentar ganarnos nosotras el pan. Las niñas y yo vamos a trabajar el bordado de un mantel para las Señoras de la Caridad en Wancester, y un paño de altar que los feligreses van a presentar a la Iglesia de Pennicote.

La señora Davilow entró tímidamente en estos detalles, pero ¿de qué otra forma iba a hacerle comprender el hecho de su posición a esta chica que, desgraciadamente, tenía que hacerse cargo del presente, hubiera lo que hubiera en el futuro para ella? Aunque ella misma imaginaba supersticiosamente que el futuro la depararía algo mejor.

—Pero está claro que se puede encontrar otro sitio que la cabaña de Sawyer —insistió Gwendolen calando en ella (como en una pesadilla) la

imagen de esta casa donde había vivido un empleado de impuestos sobre consumo.

—No, de verdad, querida. Sabes que las casas escasean, y debemos estar agradecidas de conseguir algo tan privado. No está muy mal. Hay dos pequeñas salas y cuatro habitaciones. Podrás sentarte a solas cuando quieras.

El aire compasivo hacia su madre había menguado tanto en esos momentos que Gwendolen no hizo caso de estas palabras de desaprobación.

—No puedo creer que todas tus propiedades hayan desaparecido de repente, mamá. ¿Cómo puedes estar segura en tan poco tiempo? No hace ni una semana que me escribiste.

—Las primeras noticias vinieron antes, querida. Pero no iba a arruinar tu viaje de placer hasta que no fuera necesario.

—¡Oh, maldita sea! —dijo Gwendolen, enrojeciendo de ira—. Si lo hubiera sabido, podría haber traído a casa el dinero que había ganado; y al no saberlo, me quedé y lo perdí. Tenía cerca de doscientas libras, nos habría dado para vivir por un tiempo mientras se me ocurriera algún plan. —Hizo una pausa y añadió con más ímpetu—: Todo me ha ido en contra. La gente solo se ha acercado a mí para arruinarme.

Entre la «gente» incluía a Deronda. Si no hubiera interferido en su vida habría ido de nuevo a la mesa del juego con unos pocos napoleones y podría haber vuelto a recuperar sus pérdidas.

—Debemos resignarnos a la voluntad de la Providencia, hija mía —dijo la pobre señora Davilow, sobrecogida con esta revelación del juego, pero sin atreverse a decir más. Estaba segura de que por la «gente» se refería a Grandcourt, del que no había dicho absolutamente nada. Y Gwendolen respondió inmediatamente:

—Pues yo no me resigno. Haré lo que pueda para evitarlo. ¿De qué sirve llamar a la maldad de la gente Providencia? Dijiste en tu carta que la culpa de que perdiéramos nuestro dinero fue del señor Lassmann. ¿Ha huido con todo?

—No, querida, no lo entiendes. Había grandes especulaciones. Él pretendía ganar. Estaba involucrado en el trabajo de unas minas y cosas por el estilo. Arriesgó demasiado.

—Yo no llamo a eso la Providencia: fue su imprevisión con nuestro dinero, y se le debería castigar por ello. ¿No podemos acudir a la ley y recuperar nuestra fortuna? Mi tío debería tomar medidas y no aceptar tales injusticias. Deberíamos acudir a la ley.

—Mi querida hija, la ley nunca puede devolver el dinero perdido de esa forma. Tu tío dice que es leche derramada. Además, uno debe tener una fortuna para conseguir algo de la ley: no hay leyes para la gente que está arruinada. Y nuestro dinero se nos ha escapado junto con el de otra gente. No somos las únicas víctimas: también hay otros que tienen que resignarse.

—Pero yo no me resigno a vivir en la cabaña de Sawyer y verte trabajar por cuatro peniques y unos chelines a causa de ello. Yo no lo haré. Haré lo que más se adecue a nuestro rango y nuestra educación.

—Estoy segura de que tu tío y todas nosotras estaremos de acuerdo con eso, querida, y te admiro más por ello —dijo la señora Davilow, contenta de la imprevista oportunidad para hablar de un tema difícil—. No pretendía que te resignaras a lo peor cuando pudiera surgir algo mejor. Tanto tu tío como tu tía han comprendido que tus capacidades y tu educación significaban una fortuna para ti, y ya han oído algo que esté a tu altura.

—¿De qué se trata, mamá? —Parte del enfado de Gwendolen se convirtió en interés y no hacía más que cábalas sobre el asunto.

—Se ofrecen dos situaciones. Una es en la familia de un obispo, donde hay tres hijas; y la otra es una escuela de rango bastante elevado; en ambas tu nivel de francés, de música, de baile, y tus maneras y hábitos como señora, son exactamente los que se requieren. En cada uno pagan cien libras al año, y de momento… —la señora Davilow se asustó y vaciló un poco—, para librarte del insignificante modo de vida que tenemos que llevar, tal vez podrías aceptar uno de los dos.

—¿Qué? ¿Ser como la señorita Graves en la casa de Madame Meunier? No.

—Yo creo que sería más adecuado el del Dr. Mompert. No puede haber penurias en la familia de un obispo.

—Perdona, mamá. En cualquier parte hay penurias para una institutriz. Y no veo por qué sería más agradable ser vista como una inferior en la familia de un obispo que en cualquier otra. Además, sabes muy bien que odio enseñar. ¡Imagíname haciendo callar a tres niñas torpes como Alice! Antes preferiría emigrar que ser una institutriz.

Su madre no le preguntó a qué se refería exactamente con emigrar. La señora Davilow guardaba silencio, viendo que no había salida, y temiendo el choque que podría haber cuando Gwendolen tuviera que encontrarse con sus tíos. Había un aire de reticencia en la resistente forma altiva de hablar de Gwendolen, que suponía tenía reservado un plan determinado, y su ignorancia

casi total, exhibida continuamente, no podía anular el convencimiento de la madre de la efectividad de esa voluntad contundente y atrevida que la había dominado hasta a ella misma.

—Tengo algunos ornamentos, mamá, y podría venderlos —dijo Gwendolen—. Harían una buena suma. Quiero una pequeña cantidad, solo para ir tirando. Diría que Marshall en Wanceseter los aceptaría: recuerdo que me enseñó una vez unos brazaletes que dijo había comprado a una señora. Jocosa podría ir y preguntarle. Jocosa va a dejarnos, ya lo sé. Pero podría hacer eso primero.

—Ella haría cualquier cosa que pudiera, la pobrecita. Todavía no te lo he dicho: quería que me quedara con todos sus ahorros, sus trescientas libras. Le dije que estableciera una pequeña escuela. Será muy duro para ella ir a una nueva familia ahora que ha estado tanto tiempo con nosotras.

—Oh, recomiéndala para las hijas del obispo —dijo Gwendolen, con un repentino destello jocoso en su rostro—. Estoy segura de que lo hará mejor que yo.

—Guárdate de decir tales cosas a tu tío —dijo la señora Davilow—. Se ofenderá si menosprecias lo que se ha esforzado tanto por conseguirte. Pero diría que algo más te ronda por la cabeza que a lo mejor él no desaprobaría, si le consultas.

—Hay alguien más a quien quiero consultar primero. ¿Están todavía los Arrowpoint en Quetcham? ¿Y Herr Klesmer está allí? Pero diría que no sabes nada de eso, pobre mamá. ¿Puede ir Jeffries a caballo con una nota?

—Oh, querida. Jeffries no está aquí, y el comerciante se ha llevado los caballos. Pero alguien podría ir en nuestro lugar desde la granja de Leek. Los Arrowpoint están en Quetcham, lo sé. La señorita Arrowpoint dejó su tarjeta el otro día. No pude verla. Pero no sé nada de Herr Klesmer. ¿Quieres enviarla antes de mañana?

—Sí, tan pronto como sea posible. Escribiré una nota —dijo Gwendolen, levantándose.

—¿En qué puedes estar pensando, Gwen? —dijo la señora Davilow, aliviada en medio de su asombro por sus signos de entusiasmo y mejor humor.

—No te preocupe, será para bien, mamá —dijo Gwendolen, sentándose de nuevo un momento para compensarla con sus caricias—. Pretendo hacer algo. No te importe el qué hasta que todo esté arreglado. Y entonces te sentirás consolada. ¡Tu hermosa cara! Ha envejecido diez años durante estas tres

semanas. Venga, vamos, no llores —Gwendolen, sosteniendo la cabeza de su madre con ambas manos, besó sus párpados temblorosos—. Pero procura no contradecirme o ponerme trabas. Debo decidir por mí misma. No debo ser dirigida por mi tío o por cualquier otra persona. Mi vida es asunto mío. Y creo —en esto su tono tomó un matiz de menosprecio—, creo que puedo hacer más por ti que dejarte vivir en la cabaña de Sawyer.

Al pronunciar esta última frase Gwendolen se levantó de nuevo, y se dirigió a un escritorio donde escribió la siguiente nota a Klesmer:

> La señorita Harleth presenta sus respetos a Herr Klesmer y se aventura a solicitarle la merced de contactar con ella, si es posible mañana mismo. Su motivo para abusar así de su amabilidad es de una naturaleza muy seria. Desgraciadas circunstancias familiares la han obligado a seguir por un camino que solo puede tomar con el consejo del gran conocimiento y juicio de Herr Klesmer.

—Te ruego que envíes esto a Quetcham inmediatamente, mamá —dijo Gwendolen, mientras le entregaba la carta—. El hombre debe esperar una respuesta. No perdamos tiempo.

Por el momento, el objetivo inmediato era despachar la carta; pero cuando este punto estuvo asegurado, le sobrevino una nueva ansiedad que la mantuvo en un estado angustioso. Si ocurriera que Klesmer no estuviera en Quetcham, ¿qué es lo siguiente que haría? La confianza de Gwendolen en su buena suerte, por así decir, había sufrido un buen golpe. Las cosas se le habían puesto en contra. Un matrimonio espléndido que se le presentaba al alcance había desvelado un terrible secreto. Las oportunidades de la ruleta no se habían ajustado a sus intereses; y un hombre que no conocía de nada se había interpuesto entre ellas y sus intenciones. El comportamiento de esa gente aburrida que manejaba los negocios del mundo tenía la culpa de todo lo que le había perjudicado a ella en particular. Gwendolen Harleth, con toda su belleza y su fuerza consciente, sentía cernirse sobre ella la amenaza de la humillación: por primera vez las condiciones de este mundo le parecían como si ella se hubiera desviado y hubiera acabado dentro de una muchedumbre precipitada y exaltada, no más cuidada y protegida que miles de otras chicas, a pesar de que era una desgracia exclusiva de ella. Si Klesmer no se hallaba en Quetcham, eso no sería más que una pieza más del conjunto: la inoportuna negativa se erigía como una posibilidad, y mantuvo a su mente dando vueltas a alternativas desesperadas que pudieran librarla de la cabaña de Sawyer o de la última necesidad de «aceptar la situación», una expresión que superaba cualquier penuria que más hiriese a su orgullo, y que más enojo le causaba; por lo menos lo que su experiencia le permitía imaginar como penuria.

Con todo, podía ser que Klesmer estuviese allí, y Gwendolen pensó en el resultado si era así con una esperanza que incluso proyectó una luz satisfactoria sobre sus peculiares problemas, que bien podrían atribuirse a los de las biografías de personas célebres o notables. Y si hubiera oído a sus conocidos más inmediatos interrogados sobre si la consideraban notable a ella, el primero que dijera «no» la habría sorprendido.

Capítulo 22

> Satisfacemos nuestra imaginación con enredos inventados,
> pero nuestra vida mientras tanto
> permanece en la penumbra, donde se mueven las pasiones agitadas
> y van y vienen, otorgando a nuestros hechos
> el modelo acostumbrado.

La nota de Gwendolen, que llegó «entre demasiado pronto y demasiado tarde»[100], fue puesta en manos de Klesmer justo en el momento en que se iba de Quetcham, y para no contradecir la amabilidad que ella suponía en él, pasó la noche, no sin cierto inconveniente, en Wancester.

La magnífica mansión, equipada de acuerdo con el máximo gasto, se había vuelto de hecho demasiado agobiante para él; sus dueños, como algunos grandes políticos, habían quedado sorprendidos por la insurrección contra el orden establecido de las cosas, y que nosotros, gente sencilla, podemos darnos cuenta tras los sucesos, que todo se fraguó bajo sus mismas narices.

Como era habitual, había muchos invitados en la casa, y de entre ellos uno del que la señorita Arrowpoint entrevió un nuevo pretendiente a su alcance; un político de buena familia que esperaba confiadamente obtener un título nobiliario, y había manifestado que precisaba de una buena fortuna para mantener el título apropiadamente. Las herederas varían, y las personas interesadas de antemano en una de ellas saben que pueden encontrar que sea demasiado rubia o pelirroja, alta y desgarbada, o de baja estatura y rechoncha, violenta y caprichosa, o distraída e insípida; pero en cada caso se da por supuesto que ella se consideraría a sí misma un apéndice de su fortuna, y que se casaría con quien los demás pensaran que debería ir su fortuna. La naturaleza, sin embargo, no solo no se acomoda bien a nuestras costumbres favoritas al darnos solo hijas, sino que de vez en cuando dota a la hija no esperada con una mente clara y una voluntad fuerte. Los Arrowpoint habían experimentado ya algunas de estas ansiedades precisamente por las cualidades de su Catherine. Ella no iba aceptar que fuese su deber social casarse con un noble necesitado o con un plebeyo que estuviera a punto de ascender hacia la nobleza; y no dejaban de preocuparse por su persistencia en rechazar ofertas apropiadas. En cuanto a la posibilidad de estar enamorada de Klesmer no estaban en absoluto preocupados —un tipo de ceguera muy común—. Pues en

general los mortales tienen una gran capacidad para sorprenderse por la presencia de un suceso por el que han hecho todo lo posible por que suceda, así como por la ausencia de otro por el que no han hecho nada más que desearlo. Los padres se sorprenden por la ignorancia de sus hijos, a pesar de haber utilizado los métodos más caros y tradicionales de asegurarla; maridos y mujeres se han sorprendido mutuamente por la pérdida de afecto por la que no se han tomado ninguna molestia en mantener; y a todos nosotros a su vez nos extraña que nuestros vecinos no nos admiren. En este sentido resulta que la verdad parece altamente improbable. La verdad es algo diferente de las torpes combinaciones habituales engendradas por nuestros deseos. La hora del asombro de los Arrowpoint había llegado.

Cuando existe una pasión entre una heredera y un hombre de espíritu independiente y altivo, es difícil que lleguen a entenderse; pero es probable que se superen estas dificultades a menos que el hombre orgulloso se encierre en una coartada constante. Los encuentros breves tras una estudiada ausencia se manifiestan efectivos; pero todavía es más efectiva la compañía frecuente, acompañada de plena simpatía y cualidades admirables por ambas partes; sobre todo cuando uno está en la posición de maestro y la otra se halla conscientemente complacida en su capacidad receptiva que produce también gusto en el maestro. La situación es famosa en la historia y no tiene ahora menos encanto que el que tenía en los días de Abelardo[101].

Pero a los Arrowpoint no se les había ocurrido este tipo de comparación cuando contrataron por primera vez a Klesmer en Quetcham. Tener a un músico de primera categoría en casa es un privilegio solo propio de los más ricos; el talento musical de Catherine requería todas las facilidades; y ella particularmente deseaba usar su tiempo libre en el campo para estudiar más concienzudamente. Klesmer no era todavía un Liszt[102], al que se entendía que le adoraran las mujeres de todos los países europeos salvo Laponia: pero incluso admitiendo esa suposición, no se infería que fuera a declararse a una heredera. Ningún músico de honor haría eso. Todavía se concebía menos que Catherine le diera el menor pretexto para consentir tal atrevimiento. El precio que iba a pagar el señor Arrowpoint al contratar a Klesmer le dejaba tan tranquilo como si este fuera un ayudante más. Allí donde no puede concebirse el matrimonio, los sentimientos de una chica permanecen seguros.

Klesmer era ante todo un hombre de honor, pero los matrimonios raras veces empiezan con proposiciones formales y, además, el límite que

Catherine tenía de lo inconcebible no se correspondía exactamente con el de su madre.

Las personas de fuera se habrían dado cuenta con más facilidad que la posición de Klesmer habría sido peligrosa para él si la señorita Arrowpoint hubiera sido una reconocida belleza; sin tener en cuenta que la más poderosa de todas las bellezas es la que se revela tras la simpatía y no antes. Existe un encanto en los ojos y en los labios que acompaña cada pequeña frase con la que se declara una percepción delicada o un buen sentimiento, con cada palabra discreta y con cada sonrisa que muestran un corazón abierto a los demás; y no hay un modo de volverse que produzca más satisfacción que el que da la seguridad de saber que esa persona tiene presente a quien no deja de pensar en ella. ¡Qué dignidad existe al reunir en un único estado las risas y los fruncimientos, sin interpretarlos nunca mal! ¡Qué adorable baño de humanidad encontramos en una mente que puede iluminar la comprensión y en unas manos que pueden obrar correctamente! La belleza más evidente, adorable en ocasiones —diríamos sin maledicencia— empieza siendo una apología de la locura, y termina como otras apologías siendo tediosa por su repetición; y que Klesmer, aunque muy sensible a ello, tuviera un afecto pasional hacia la señorita Arrowpoint, no era más paradójico que cualquier otro triunfo de las múltiples formas de la simpatía sobre una atracción monótona. Nos parece menos censurable que se nos catalogue por los excesos esclavizantes de nuestras pasiones que por no haber estado a la altura en pasiones más intensas; pero si se supiera la verdad, nuestra presunta intensidad es a menudo la estupidez de no saber que más hacer con nosotros mismos. Tannhaüser[103], puede llegar a pensarse, era un caballero de imaginación pobre, con apenas más locuacidad que un torpe soldado de la Guardia Real. Merlín[104] tuvo sus días inspirados, pero no dejó de repetirse cuando cayó en aquella desesperada cautividad; Ulises[105] experimentó un aburrimiento tan manifiesto en circunstancias parecidas que la misma Calipso adelantó su partida. Hay una versión en la que Ulises luego dejó a Penélope; pero dado que ella estaba absorta en el trabajo con el estambre, y fue probablemente de ella de quien Telémaco heredó su naturaleza quisquillosa y mezquina, constantemente preocupado por las propiedades y por el consumo diario de carne, no se puede sacar ninguna conclusión de este ya dudoso escándalo en cuanto a la relación entre el compañerismo y la perseverancia.

Klesmer era tan versátil y fascinante como un joven Ulises con el conocimiento suficiente —el que la naturaleza parecía haberle dado en primer

lugar de forma generosa y sobre el cual agregó él mismo después a la música como un poder que dominase al resto—, y como en Mendelssohn[106], encontró la expresión no solo en la altísima calidad de su ejecución, sino en ese fervor por el trabajo creativo y la investigación teórica que impregna todo el futuro de una vida con la luz de un propósito congruente y devoto. Sus pecados de arrogancia y vanidad no excedían los que habitualmente se encuentran en las mejores familias inglesas; y Catherine Arrowpoint no tenía inquietudes semejantes que pudieran enfrentarse con las suyas: a pesar de su amabilidad natural se mantenía quizás demasiado fríamente distante e independiente. Pero era una de esas agradables criaturas que al tratarlas queda uno encantado con su descubrimiento, pues la integridad que se observa en sus habilidades y en su expresión fomentan el deseo de saber su opinión sobre todos los temas, o de cómo van a llevar a cabo cualquier cosa que emprendan, de forma que terminan por levantar no solo continuas expectativas, sino además una permanente sensación de plenitud —la sístole y diástole del compañerismo dichoso—. En casos así, la representación externa se convierte fácilmente en lo que la imagen es para el adorador. No pasó mucho tiempo antes de que los dos se dieran cuenta de que cada uno de ellos estaba interesado por el otro; pero el «cuánto» quedaba sin saberse. Klesmer no concebía que la señorita Arrowpoint fuera probablemente a considerarlo como un posible pretendiente, y ella no estaba acostumbrada a verse a sí misma estimulando miradas que eran algo más que amigables, ni a temer la expresión de algún hombre que no estuviera enamorado de su fortuna. Cada uno estaba satisfecho de sufrir cierto sentido no compartido de negación por el bien del entorno del otro; y bajo estas circunstancias no hubo necesidad de restringir las visitas de Klesmer durante el último año ni en el campo ni en la ciudad. Sabía muy bien que si la señorita Arrowpoint hubiera sido pobre la habría cortejado ardientemente en lugar de manifestarlo atacando el piano o cruzando sus brazos y soltando una arenga hiperbólica sobre algo tan impersonal como el polo norte; y ella no era menos consciente de que si a Klesmer le hubiera sido posible desear su mano, ella habría encontrado razones poderosas para dársela. En esto consiste la seguridad de las tazas llenas, tan seguras de no derramar su contenido como las medio vacías, siempre que no haya una alteración. Naturalmente, a medida que pasaba el tiempo, el sentimiento callado no podía permanecer en el mismo nivel, y en la actual visita a Quetcham, Klesmer había empezado a pensar que ya no volvería más; mientras, Catherine era cada vez más sensible a su frecuente

brusquedad, que ella veía con resentimiento por pensar que era un esfuerzo innecesario por su parte por mantener la superioridad en todos los sentidos salvo en lo convencional.

Mientras tanto, entró en escena el expectante par[107], el señor Bult, un acreditado hombre del partido, que aunque neutral en la vida privada, tenía una fuerte opinión respecto las regiones del Níger, se sentía como en casa en las zonas brasileñas, hablaba con decisión sobre asuntos en los mares del Sur, estudiaba profundamente tanto sus discursos parlamentarios como los que hacía en la calle, y tenía la íntegra firmeza y el completo color rosado propio de un británico vigoroso que se hallaba en el ecuador de la vida. Catherine, consciente de que existía el tácito entendimiento de que era un marido irrechazable para una heredera, no tenía nada que decir en contra de él salvo que le resultaba tremendamente aburrido. El señor Bult estaba muy confiado, y no tenía ni idea que su insensibilidad hacia el contrapunto pudiera volvérsele en contra. Apenas consideraba a Klesmer como un ser humano serio que tuviera el derecho a votar; y no le importaba la afición de la señorita Arrowpoint a la música más que sus probables gastos en la puntilla antigua. Se sintió por tanto un poco sorprendido por el arrebato de Klesmer en una sobremesa a causa de la falta de idealismo en la política inglesa, que dejaba que cualquier relación de semejanza entre razas distantes fuera determinada simplemente por la necesidad de un mercado: las Cruzadas, según él, tenían al menos esta excusa, tenían un estandarte bajo el cual las almas generosas podían agruparse; por supuesto, se unían también los sinvergüenzas, pero ¿y qué?, también hay sinvergüenzas que están de acuerdo con nosotros en muchas cosas, por ejemplo, en comparar barato y vender caro. Este tema provocó que Klesmer mostrara durante un buen rato su elocuencia, gestos y más cosas, como fuegos artificiales prendidos accidentalmente, y luego quedó sumido en un silencio inamovible. Al señor Bult no le sorprendía que las opiniones de Klesmer fueran atolondradas, pero sí le había dejado atónito su dominio de la lengua inglesa y su capacidad de sacarle punta a los temas de una forma digna de un elector político, lo que se explicaba probablemente por su origen polaco, o checo, o de algún sitio de por ahí, en algún estado refugiado que le hubiera obligado a hacer de la música su profesión; y esa noche en la sala de estar, por primera vez se dirigió a Klesmer que estaba al piano, y estando cerca la señorita Arrowpoint, le preguntó:

—No sabía que fuera usted un hombre político.

La única respuesta de Klesmer fue cruzarse de brazos, adelantar un poco su labio inferior y quedarse mirando al señor Bult.

—Debe estar acostumbrado a hablar en público. Habla usted inusualmente bien, aunque no estoy de acuerdo con sus opiniones. Por lo que dijo de los sentimientos, imagino que es usted un paneslavista[108].

—No; me llamo Elijah. Soy el Judío Errante[109] —dijo Klesmer lanzando una sonrisa a la señorita Arrowpoint, y precipitándose hacia el piano hizo un movimiento repentino balanceándose hacia delante y hacia atrás. Al señor Bult le resultó más bien ofensiva esta bufonería, propia de polacos, pero al estar presente la señorita Arrowpoint no quiso abandonar la sala.

—Herr Klesmer tiene ideas cosmopolitas —dijo la señorita Arrowpoint intentando controlar la situación—. Espera con ansia la fusión de las razas.

—Yo también, con todo mi corazón —dijo el señor Bult, queriendo ser gracioso—. Ya sabía que tenía demasiado talento para ser un simple músico.

—Ah, señor, se equivoca en eso —dijo Klesmer, encendiéndose—. Ningún hombre tiene el suficiente talento para ser músico. La mayoría de las personas tiene demasiado poco. Un artista creativo no es un simple músico de la misma forma que un hombre de estado no es un simple político. No somos muñecas ingeniosas, señor, que viven dentro de una caja de música y salen a mirar al mundo solo cuando se requiere diversión. Ayudamos a gobernar las naciones y pasamos a la historia tanto como cualquier otro hombre público. Nos situamos al mismo nivel que los legisladores. Y un hombre que sabe hablar a través de la música está llamado a algo más difícil que la elocuencia parlamentaria.

Al pronunciar la última palabra, Klesmer se dio la vuelta sobre la banqueta de su piano y se alejó.

La señorita Arrowpoint enrojeció, y el señor Bult comentó con su habitual firmeza impasible:

—Tu pianista no se considera poca cosa.

—Herr Klesmer es algo más que un pianista —dijo la señorita Arrowpoint como disculpándose—. Es un gran músico en el sentido más amplio del término. Es comparable a Schubert y Mendelssohn.

—Ah, ustedes las damas entienden de estas cosas —dijo el señor Bult, pensando, sin embargo, que tales cosas eran frívolas, al haberse mostrado Klesmer como un dandi engreído.

Catherine, a la que siempre le sabía mal que Klesmer se envaneciera, encontró una oportunidad al día siguiente en la sala de música para decir:

—¿Por qué se acaloró tanto anoche con el señor Bult? No pretendía herirle.

—¿Desea que sea agradable con él? —dijo Klesmer, más bien rudamente.

—Creo que vale la pena que se comporte de forma cívica.

—¿A usted no le resulta difícil soportarlo, entonces? Tiene usted respeto por un político perogrullesco tan insensible como un buey a cualquier cosa que no pueda valorar en términos políticos. Usted cree que su obtusidad monumental concuerda con la dignidad del caballero inglés.

—Yo no he dicho eso.

—Quería decir que yo actué sin dignidad y que usted está ofendida conmigo.

—Ahora está usted ligeramente más cerca de la verdad —dijo Catherine, sonriendo.

—Entonces será mejor que coloque mis ropas de luto en la maleta y me marche inmediatamente.

—Yo no lo veo así. Si tengo que soportar su crítica sobre mi opereta, a usted no le debería importar mi crítica a su impaciencia.

—Pues me importa. Usted habría querido que me tomara su impertinencia ignorante sobre un «simple músico» sin ponerle a él en su lugar. Tengo que oír blasfemias contra mis dioses además de insultos a mí mismo. Pero le ruego me perdone. Es imposible que vea el asunto desde mi punto de vista. Ni siquiera usted puede entender la ira del artista: es de una casta distinta a la suya.

—Eso es cierto —dijo Catherine, dejando que le traicionaran parte de sus sentimientos—. Es de una casta a la que admiro, una casta muy superior a la mía.

Klesmer, que se había sentado en una mesa a mirar unas partituras, se levantó y alejándose un poco, dijo:

—Es de agradecer que sienta eso. Pero es mejor que me vaya, de todas formas. He decidido irme, por el bien de todos. Usted puede progresar perfectamente sin mí: su opereta va sobre ruedas, seguirá yendo bien. Y la compañía de su señor Bult me ilusiona «wie die Faust ins Auge»[110]. Voy a cancelar mis obligaciones. Debo partir hacia San Petersburgo.

No hubo respuesta.

—¿Está de acuerdo conmigo que es mejor que me vaya? —dijo Klesmer, algo irritado.

—Por supuesto, si eso es lo que necesita por su trabajo y sus sentimientos. Solo me queda maravillarme de cómo ha consentido darnos tanto de su tiempo en este último año. Debe haber cosas que le interesen el triple en otras partes. Nunca se me ha ocurrido pensar que haya venido hasta aquí por otra cosa que no fuera un sacrificio.

—¿Por qué iba a hacer un sacrificio? —dijo Klesmer, sentándose de nuevo en el piano, y tecleando algunas notas con la delicadeza de un eco en la distancia y que formaban una melodía que había compuesto para las palabras de Heine: «Ich hab' dich geliebet und liebe dich noch»[111].

—Ese es el misterio —dijo Catherine, sin querer traslucir sus sentimientos, aunque se agitó un poco. Por el mismo motivo estaba rasgando un trozo de papel en pequeños pedazos, como si un hada cruel le hubiera impuesto la tarea de multiplicarlos hasta el infinito.

—¿No se le ocurre ningún motivo? —dijo Klesmer, cruzándose de brazos.

—Ninguno que parezca probable en lo más mínimo.

—Entonces se lo diré yo. Es porque usted es para mí la principal mujer del mundo, la mujer entronada cuyos colores llevo entre mi corazón y mi armadura.

Las manos de Catherine temblaron de tal forma que no pudo continuar rasgando el papel: aún menos podían sus labios pronunciar una sola palabra. Klesmer continuó:

—Esta sería mi última impertinencia, si pretendiera encontrar algo por ella. Pero eso está fuera de toda cuestión. No pretendo eso. Pero usted dijo una vez que formaba parte de su sino sospechar que cada hombre que la cortejara fuera un aventurero, y que lo que la enojaba más era que los hombres le achacaran la locura de creer que la cortejaban por lo que usted era. ¿No dijo usted eso?

—Muy posiblemente —fue la respuesta, en un murmullo imperceptible.

—Fue una palabra dura. Bueno, al menos un hombre que ha visto tantas mujeres como flores en mayo se ha entretenido en su presencia por lo que usted es. Y dado que es uno con el cual nunca podrá casarse, le creerá. Espero le sirva de argumento a favor de cualquier otro hombre. Pero no se entregue ni se deje devorar por un minotauro como Bult. Ahora recogeré mis cosas y me iré. Presentaré mis excusas a la señora Arrowpoint. —Klesmer se levantó al terminar de hablar y se dirigió rápidamente hacia la puerta.

—Llévese este montón de manuscritos, entonces —dijo Catherine, haciendo de repente un esfuerzo desesperado. Se había levantado para ir a por

el montón que estaba en otra mesa. Klesmer volvió, acercándose hasta solo separarles la longitud de las hojas que había entre ellos.

—¿Por qué no debería casarme con el hombre que me ama, si yo también le amo? —dijo Catherine. Para ella, el esfuerzo fue como el salto de una mujer desde la cubierta hasta el bote salvavidas.

—Sería demasiado duro, imposible, no podría usted soportarlo. Yo no valgo tanto para que usted sufra todo eso. No aceptaré el sacrificio. Todos lo considerarían un mal casamiento para usted, y sobre mí pesarían las peores acusaciones.

—¿Es por las acusaciones por lo que tiene usted miedo? Yo no temo a nada salvo a que perdamos la oportunidad de pasar el resto de nuestras vidas juntos.

La palabra decisiva había sido dicha: ya no había duda sobre el objetivo deseado por cada uno de ellos, solo quedaba pendiente el modo de llegar a él, y Catherine decidió escoger el más rápido posible. Se dirigió a su padre y a su madre que estaban en la biblioteca, y les dijo que había prometido a Klesmer casarse con él.

El estado de ánimo de la señora Arrowpoint era digno de lástima. Imagínese a Jean Jacques[112] tras escribir su ensayo sobre la influencia corruptora de las artes, despertándose entre niños de la naturaleza que no tenían ni idea de cómo prepararle el desayuno e intentaban hacer a la parrilla un hueso crudo con una piedra de sílex; o a Saint Just[113], tras denunciar fervientemente cualquier reconocimiento de preeminencia, recibiendo un voto de agradecimiento por la perfecta mediocridad de su discurso, que garantizaba que los patriotas más apagados se acabaran entregando igualmente. Algo parecido sintió la autora de «Tasso»[114], cuando lo que había reclamado sin peligro de la difunta Leonora era promulgado por su propia Catherine. Nos resulta muy duro estar a la altura de nuestra propia elocuencia, y seguir el ritmo de las palabras que lanzamos al aire, mientras pisamos la tierra sólida y estamos atados a las cosas materiales. Además, siempre se ha interpretado que las características de la literatura no son las de la vida práctica. La señora Arrowpoint deseaba, por supuesto, lo mejor en todos los niveles. No solo le gustaba sentirse en un nivel superior de sentimiento literario con las señoras con las que se relacionaba, sino que no quería estar por debajo de ellas en ningún punto de consideración social. Mientras Klesmer fuera visto y considerado como un músico tratado con condescendencia, sus peculiaridades eran pintorescas y aceptables; pero verle de repente como a su yerno le

produjo una sensación asfixiante de qué es lo que diría el mundo. Y la pobre señora estaba acostumbrada a presentar a su Catherine como un modelo de excelencia.

Bajo la primera impresión, lo olvidó todo salvo su cólera, y cogió al vuelo cualquier frase que pudiera servirle de arma.

—Si Klesmer ha supuesto que podía ofrecerse a ti, tu padre le hará ver que jamás ha tenido derecho a ello. Por favor, di algo, señor Arrowpoint.

El padre tomó el puro de su boca, y estuvo a la altura de las circunstancias al decir:

—Nunca se llevará a cabo, Cath.

—¡Llevarse a cabo! —gritó la señora Arrowpoint—. ¿Quién en su sano juicio pudo pensar que podía llevarse a cabo? Lo mismo podrías decir que envenenarse o estrangularse nunca se llevará a cabo. Es una comedia que te has inventado, Catherine. Si no, es que estás loca.

—Estoy completamente sana y lo digo en serio, mamá, y Herr Klesmer no tiene la culpa. Nunca pensó en casarse conmigo. Me di cuenta de que me amaba, y al amarle yo también, le dije que me casaría con él.

—No digas eso, Catherine —dijo la señora Arrowpoint con amargura—. Todos los demás lo dirán por ti. Serás una fábula pública. Todo el mundo dirá que has tenido que proponerte a un hombre que ha sido pagado para venir a casa, un hombre que nadie sabe qué es, un gitano, un judío, una simple burbuja de aire.

—No importa, mamá —dijo Catherine, a su vez indignada—. Todos sabemos que es un genio, como lo era Tasso.

—Aquellos tiempos no eran los de ahora, ni Klesmer es Tasso —dijo la señora Arrowpoint, acalorándose más—. No le veo el aguijón a ese sarcasmo, excepto el de la irreverencia.

—Siento herirte, mamá. Pero no voy a confiar la felicidad de mi vida a ideas en las que no creo ni a costumbres por las que no siento respeto.

—¿Has perdido, entonces, tu sentido del deber? ¿Has olvidado que eres nuestra única hija, que te corresponde depositar una gran fortuna en buenas manos?

—¿Qué son buenas manos? Mi abuelo ganó sus propiedades con el comercio.

—Señor Arrowpoint, ¿vas a quedarte sentado oyendo todo esto sin decir nada?

—Soy un caballero, Cath. Esperamos que te cases con un caballero —dijo el padre esforzándose.

—Y un hombre conectado con las instituciones de este país —dijo la madre—. Una mujer en tu posición tiene deberes serios. Cuando el deber y la inclinación se confrontan, se debe seguir el deber.

—No lo niego —dijo Catherine, enfriándose en la proporción en que su madre se calentaba—. Pero uno puede decir cosas muy verdaderas y aplicarlas mal. La gente puede usar fácilmente la sagrada palabra del deber como excusa para desear lo que cualquier otro tenga que hacer.

—¿El deseo de tus padres no es un deber para ti, entonces?

—Sí, dentro de lo razonable. Pero antes de abandonar la felicidad de mi vida…

—Catherine, Catherine, no será tu felicidad —dijo la señora Arrowpoint, en un tono de voz que parecía el de un cuervo.

—Bueno, antes de abandonar lo que a mí me parece mi felicidad, debo ver alguna razón mejor que el deseo de que me case con un noble, o de un hombre que milita en un partido que puede hacerle un noble. Me siento libre para casarme con el hombre al que amo y al que creo merecedor de ello, a menos que un deber superior me lo prohíba.

—Y así es, Catherine, pero estás cegada y no puedes verlo. Es el deber de una mujer no rebajarse. Te estás rebajando. Señor Arrowpoint, ¿vas a decir a tu hija cuál es su deber?

—Lo que ocurre, Catherine, es que Klesmer no es el hombre para ti —dijo el señor Arrowpoint. No sirve para llevar propiedades. Tiene una maldita mirada de extranjero, no es un hombre práctico.

—De verdad que no veo que tiene ver con esto, papá. La tierra de Inglaterra a menudo ha pasado a manos de los extranjeros: soldados holandeses, hijos de mujeres extranjeras de mal carácter; si nuestra tierra fuera vendida mañana probablemente pasaría a manos de algún negociante extranjero. Está en boca de todos que los estafadores podrían comprar la mitad del país. ¿Cómo puedo atajar esa marea?

—Nunca sacarás nada discutiendo sobre el matrimonio, Cath —dijo el señor Arrowpoint—. No sirve de nada tratar el tema como si fuese una cuestión parlamentaria. Debemos hacer como hacen los demás. Debemos pensar en la nación y el bien público.

—Aquí no veo que se haga referencia a ningún bien público, papá —dijo Catherine—. ¿Por qué se espera de una heredera que lleve la propiedad

ganada por el comercio a las manos de cierta clase social? Me parece un gatuperio ridículo de costumbres anticuadas y falsa ambición. Yo lo llamaría incluso un daño público. Sería mejor que la gente hiciera un nuevo tipo de bien público cambiando sus ambiciones.

—Eso es mero sofismo, Catherine —dijo la señora Arrowpoint—. Que no quieras casarte con un noble no te obliga a casarte con un parlanchín o un charlatán.

—No entiendo por qué aplicas esas palabras, mamá.

—No, diría que no —replicó su madre con considerable desprecio—. Has llegado a un nivel en el que no hay manera de que nos entendamos.

—No puede ser, Cath —dijo el señor Arrowpoint, queriendo substituir la impetuosidad de su mujer con un razonamiento más tranquilo—. Un hombre como Klesmer no puede casarse con una propiedad como la tuya. No puede ser.

—Por supuesto que no se casará —dijo la señora Arrowpoint, imperiosamente—. ¿Dónde está el hombre? Que venga aquí.

—No puedo permitir que venga a aquí a ser insultado —dijo Catherine—. No se conseguirá nada con eso.

—Supongo que te gustaría que supiera que al casarse contigo no se está casando con tu fortuna —dijo la señora Arrowpoint.

—Ciertamente; si así fuera, quisiera que lo supiera.

—Entonces será mejor que vayas a por él.

Catherine solo fue a la sala de música y dijo:

—Ven. —No creyó necesario preparar a Klesmer.

—Herr Klesmer —dijo la señora Arrowpoint, con un aire de majestuosidad despectiva—, no es necesario repetir lo que ha pasado entre nosotros y nuestra hija. El señor Arrowpoint le informará de nuestra resolución.

—Su boda queda fuera de toda cuestión —dijo el señor Arrowpoint, al que se veía demasiado cargado con su tarea, puesto en pie en una situación embarazosa de la que no le libraba su cigarro—. Es un proyecto atrevido. Por mucho menos puede reprenderse a un hombre.

—Se ha tomado una gran libertad por nuestra confianza —explotó la señora Arrowpoint, incapaz de llevar a cabo su propósito y dejar el peso de la conversación a su marido.

Klesmer hizo una ligera inclinación y permaneció en un silencio irónico.

—La pretensión es ridícula. Será mejor que lo olvide y abandone nuestra casa inmediatamente —continuó el señor Arrowpoint. Quería hacerlo sin mencionar el dinero.

—No puedo olvidar nada sin el consentimiento de su hija —dijo Klesmer —. Mi compromiso es con ella.

—Es inútil discutir la cuestión —dijo la señora Arrowpoint—. Nunca consentiremos el matrimonio. Si Catherine desobedece la desheredaremos. No se casará usted con su fortuna. Es conveniente que lo sepa.

—Señora, su fortuna es lo único que he tenido que lamentar de ella. Pero debo preguntarle a ella si no pensará que el sacrificio es más grande que lo que yo valgo.

—No es ningún sacrificio para mí —dio Catherine—, excepto que me sabe mal herir a mi padre y a mi madre. Siempre he sentido que mi fortuna ha sido una desgraciada fatalidad en mi vida.

—¿Quieres decir que nos desafías, entonces? —dijo la señora Arrowpoint.

—Quiero decir que quiero casarme con Herr Klesmer —dijo Catherine con firmeza.

—Espero que él no cuente con que cederemos —dijo la señora Arrowpoint, cuyos modales gozaban de esa impunidad en el insulto que ha sido reconocida como uno más de los privilegios de las mujeres.

—Señora —dijo Klesmer—, ciertas razones me prohíben replicar. Pero entienda que considero que ni usted ni su fortuna tienen ningún poder para concederme lo que yo valoro. Mi rango como artista me lo he ganado con mi propio esfuerzo, y no lo cambiaría por nada. Soy capaz de mantener a su hija, y no pido nada a cambio en mi vida más que su compañía.

—Dejará usted la casa, sin embargo —dijo la señora Arrowpoint.

—Me iré inmediatamente —dijo Klesmer, inclinándose y abandonando la sala.

—Que no haya ningún malentendido, mamá —dijo Catherine—; me considero comprometida a Herr Klesmer, y pretendo casarme con él.

La madre giró la cabeza y ondeó su mano en señal de despido.

—Todo esto está muy bien —dijo el señor Arrowpoint cuando Catherine se marchó—, ¿pero qué diablos vamos a hacer con la propiedad?

—Está Harry Brendall. Puede tomar el nombre.

—Harry Brendall saldrá adelante con todo enseguida —dijo el señor Arrowpoint, volviendo a encender el puro.

Y así, sin que nada hubiera sido decidido salvo la determinación de los amantes, Klesmer dejó Quetcham.

Capítulo 23

> Entre los herederos del Arte, como en la división de la Tierra Prometida, cada uno tiene que ganar su parte luchando duro; la dádiva se realiza a la manera de la profecía, y se obtiene un título sin posesión. Llevar en tu bolsillo el mapa de un estado no adquirido es una pobre forma de poseer tierras. E imaginar tirar la sandalia sobre Edom[115] es poca garantía de que un hombre pueda llegar a poner la suela de sus pies en un acre[116] suyo propio.
> Las creencias más obstinadas en que los mortales se entretienen son tales que no tienen evidencia alguna más allá del latido constante y espontáneo de su autosatisfacción —como si hubiera una semilla secreta de locura, la seguridad de que pueden mover el mundo sin la más ligera noción de lo que es un punto de apoyo o una balanza—.

—Por favor, ves a la Iglesia, mamá —dijo Gwendolen a la mañana siguiente —. Prefiero ver a Herr Klesmer a solas (había escrito en respuesta a su nota que estaría con ella a las once).

—No creo que eso sea muy correcto —dijo la señora Davilow, ansiosa.

—Nuestros asuntos son demasiado serios para pensar en reglas tan absurdas —dijo Gwendolen despectivamente—. Son insultantes además de ridículas.

—¿No te importaría que Isabel se sentara contigo? Estaría leyendo en una esquina.

—No, no podría; se mordería las uñas y no dejaría de mirarnos. Sería demasiado irritante. Confía en mi juicio, mamá. Tengo que estar sola. Llévalas a todas a la Iglesia.

Gwendolen se salió con la suya, por supuesto; solo que la señorita Merry y dos de las chicas se quedaron en casa, sentadas enfrente de las ventanas del comedor para dar a la casa el aspecto de estar habitada.

Era una agradable mañana de domingo. La luz menguante y melancólica del amanecer otoñal bañaba las hojas esparcidas por la hierba y se colaba suavemente por las ventanas en bandas brillantes sesgadas iluminando el viejo mobiliario y el panel de vidrio que lo reflejaba, las sillas tapizadas con coronas de flores, los oscuros cuadros enigmáticos, el órgano anticuado en el que Gwendolen se había divertido haciendo de Santa Cecilia aquel feliz primer día en que llegaron, los montones de chismes pálidos y polvorientos que se veían a través de las puertas abiertas de la antesala donde se había salido con la suya para llevar su vestido griego como Hermione. Este último

recuerdo la entretuvo un buen rato, ¿pues no se había mostrado Klesmer lleno de admiración por su porte y expresión? Cualquier cosa que él hubiera dicho, cualquier cosa que ella imaginaba que él había pensado, le despertaba en estos momentos el máximo interés: quizás no se había sentido antes en su vida tan interiormente dependiente, tan necesitada conscientemente de la opinión de otra persona. Su espíritu palpitaba de nuevo, había un nuevo elemento de debate en su autoestima que hasta entonces había sido un don dichoso de su intuición. Con todo, era un constante suplicio pensar que Klesmer no la conocía demasiado, y cualquier conclusión desfavorable suya tendría unos fundamentos muy endebles. Pero se sentía lo suficientemente preparada para cualquier cosa.

Para ir haciendo tiempo recogió sus volúmenes y piezas de música, y colocándolas encima del piano, se dispuso ella misma a clasificarlas. Entonces, al darse cuenta de los reflejos de sus movimientos por el panel de cristal, le gustó la contemplación de su imagen y caminó hacia ella. Vestida de negro sin un solo ornamento, y con la cálida blancura de su piel resaltada entre la corona color castaño de su pelo y su cuerpo perfectamente recortado, podría haber tentado a un artista que intentara de nuevo formar una estatua romana de mármol pero en tonos blanco, negro y leonado. Viéndose avanzar lentamente, pensó: «Soy hermosa», no de forma exultante, pero con grave decisión. Ser hermosa era, después de todo, la condición por la que más necesitaba testimonio externo. Si alguien ponía alguna objeción a la curva de su nariz o a la forma de su cuello y su mejilla, no tendría la sensación de que podría mostrar actualmente su poder de conquista en estas ramas de perfección femenina.

No hubo mucho tiempo que emplear de esta forma antes de que el sonido de las ruedas, el fuerte ruido del timbre, y la apertura de las puertas le aseguraron de que de ninguna manera iba a ser decepcionada. Su agitación fue creciendo paulatinamente. A pesar de la confianza que tenía en sí misma, temía a Klesmer como parte de ese mundo inmanejable que era independiente de sus deseos —algo vitriólico que no dejaba de arder al sonreír o fruncir el cejo—. ¡Pobrecilla! Se hallaba en una crisis más profunda de su destino como mujer que la que tuvo en su experiencia pasada con Grandcourt. La cuestión entonces era si ella debía tomar a un hombre particular por esposo. El punto crucial de la cuestión ahora era si ella necesitaba tener un marido, si podía conseguir la suficiente autonomía y la ambición satisfactoria sin el sometimiento.

Klesmer hizo una reverencia lo más respetuosa posible ante la ancha entrada de la antesala —mostrando a su vez la deferencia de sus pantalones de algodón y sus perfectos guantes (los «maestros de aquellos que saben» son gracias a Dios todos humanos)—. Gwendolen le recibió con una gravedad inusual, y tendiéndole la mano, dijo—: Es muy amable por haber venido, Herr Klesmer. Espero que no haya pensado de mí que soy presuntuosa.

—Tomé su deseo como una orden que me honró —dijo Klesmer respondiendo con gravedad. Intentó olvidarse de sus propios asuntos para dedicar la máxima atención a lo que Gwendolen tuviera que decirle; pero se hallaba todavía en un estado tal de agitación por los sucesos del día anterior, que sus expresiones parecían más que mordaces.

Gwendolen se hallaba por una vez demasiado dominada por sus sentimientos para recordar las formalidades. Continuó de pie al lado del piano, y Klesmer se colocó en el otro extremo de él, de espaldas a la luz y con sus terribles ojos omniscientes sobre ella. No serviría la afectación, así que fue al grano.

—Deseo consultarle, Herr Klesmer. Hemos perdido toda nuestra fortuna; no tenemos nada. Debo ganar mi propio pan, y deseo proveer a mi mamá, para librarla de cualquier penalidad. La única manera que se me ocurre, y la prefiero a cualquier otra cosa, es convertirme en una actriz, subir a los escenarios. Pero por supuesto, me gustaría tener una buena posición, y pensé, si usted pensara que pudiera —aquí Gwendolen se puso un poco más nerviosa —, que sería mejor para mí ser cantante, y estudiar canto.

Klesmer dejó su sombrero sobre el piano, y se cruzó de brazos como para concentrarse.

—Ya sé —continuó Gwendolen recuperando el color y palideciendo de nuevo—, ya sé que mi modo de cantar es muy defectuoso; pero he sido mal enseñada; podría estudiar. Y usted entenderá mi deseo: cantar y actuar a la vez, como Grisi[117], da una posición más elevada. Naturalmente, me gustaría tomar un rango tan elevado como pueda. Y puedo confiar en su juicio. Estoy segura de que me dirá la verdad.

Gwendolen de alguna manera tuvo la convicción que ahora que había hecho esta seria revelación, la verdad sería favorable.

Pero Klesmer seguía sin hablar. Se sacó sus guantes rápidamente, los arrojó dentro de su sombrero, se llevó las manos a las caderas, y fue caminando hacia la otra parte de la habitación. Estaba lleno de compasión hacia esta chica: quería ir con cuidado en lo que le dijera. Cuando se volvió

de nuevo, la miró con un leve fruncimiento indagatorio, y dijo amablemente aunque con rapidez:

—Supongo que nunca ha visto nada de artistas y sus vidas, me refiero a músicos, actores, y artistas de ese tipo.

—Oh no —dijo Gwendolen, en absoluto perturbada por la referencia a este hecho obvio en la historia de una joven señorita que hasta entonces ha tenido de todo.

—Usted tiene… perdóneme —dijo Klesmer, haciendo de nuevo una pausa ante el piano—, para llegar a una conclusión en un asunto como este, hay que tenerlo todo en cuenta, usted tiene tal vez, ¿veinte años?

—Tengo veintiuno —dijo Gwendolen, a la que le sobrevino un pequeño temor. ¿Cree que soy demasiado mayor?

Klesmer se pellizcó el labio inferior y sacudió sus largos dedos hacia arriba de una forma totalmente enigmática.

—Muchas personas empiezan más tarde que otras —dijo Gwendolen, traicionada por su consciencia habitual de tener información valiosa que ofrecer.

Klesmer no hizo caso, sino que dijo con una amabilidad más cuidadosa que nunca:

—Usted probablemente no ha pensado en una carrera artística hasta ahora, no ha considerado la idea, el deseo, ¿cómo lo diría?, usted no ha sentido el anhelo de ser una actriz, o cualquier cosa parecida, hasta que se ha encontrado con el problema actual.

—No exactamente; me gustaba actuar. Ya he actuado; usted me vio, si lo recuerda, me vio en alguna pantomima, y haciendo de Hermione —dijo Gwendolen, temiendo de veras que Klesmer se hubiera olvidado.

—Sí, sí —respondió rápidamente—, me acuerdo, me acuerdo perfectamente —y de nuevo caminó hasta el final de la sala. Le resultaba difícil evitar este tipo de movimiento cuando se hallaba en alguna discusión ya fuera audible o silenciosa.

Gwendolen sintió que la estaba evaluando. La demora era desagradable. Pero no concebía que la balanza se inclinara hacia el lado incorrecto, y le pareció elegante decir:

—Me sentiré muy agradecida por tomarse la molestia de darme su opinión, cualquiera que sea.

—Señorita Harleth —dijo Klesmer, volviéndose hacia ella y hablando con un ligero incremento en su tono—: no le ocultaré nada en esta materia. Me

consideraría a mí mismo culpable si enmascaro ciertas cosas, si las pinto demasiado negras o demasiado blancas. Los dioses guardan una maldición para aquellos que enseñan a otros el mal camino. Y si desencamino a alguien tan joven, tan hermosa, en quien confío encontrará su felicidad por el buen camino, me consideraría un *Bösewicht*[118]. —La voz de Klesmer en la última palabra se rebajó a un susurro.

A Gwendolen le dio un vuelco el corazón ante esta inesperada solemnidad, y mantuvo una especie de mirada fascinada sobre el rostro de Klesmer, mientras este continuaba.

—Es usted una joven hermosa, ha sido educada con comodidades, ha hecho lo que le apetecía, no se ha dicho a sí misma: «Tengo que saber esto de forma exacta», «Tengo que entender esto de forma exacta», «Tengo que hacer esto de forma exacta» —al pronunciar estos terribles *tengo que*, Klesmer levantó sucesivamente sus tres largos dedos—. En definitiva, no ha sido llamada a ser otra cosa que una joven señorita encantadora, en la que sería descortés encontrar una falta.

Hizo una pausa por un instante; luego, apoyando de nuevo sus dedos en su cadera, y sacando hacia fuera su poderosa mandíbula, dijo:

—Bien, entonces, con esa preparación, desea intentar la vida del artista; desea intentar una vida de trabajo arduo, incesante… y de reconocimiento incierto. Tendrá que ganarse el reconocimiento, como el pan; y ambos vendrán lentamente, de forma escasa, ¿qué digo?, pueden no llegar a venir.

Este tono de descorazonamiento, que Klesmer había medio esperado que bastase sin tener que decir nada más desagradable, provocó cierta resistencia en Gwendolen. Con un ligero movimiento de cabeza, y aparentando estar picada, dijo:

—Creí que usted, siendo un artista, consideraría su vida como una de las más honorables y encantadoras. ¿Y si yo no puedo hacer nada mejor? Supongo que puedo soportar los mismos riesgos como hace la otra gente.

—¿Hacer algo mejor? —dijo Klesmer, un poco encendido—. No, mi querida señorita Harleth, no podría usted hacer algo mejor, ningún hombre ni mujer podrían hacer algo mejor, si se hiciera realmente bien. No estoy desacreditando la vida del verdadero artista. La estoy exaltando. Quiero decir, está fuera del alcance de todos, salvo de las organizaciones selectas, concebidas para amar la perfección y trabajar por ella, dispuestas, como todos los amantes de verdad, a soportar fatigas, a esperar, a decir: «Todavía no soy digno», pero ella, el Arte, mi señora, es digna, y viviré para merecerla. ¿Una

vida honorable? Sí. Pero el honor proviene de la vocación interior y de los éxitos cosechados con el sudor: no hay ningún honor en ponerse los últimos trajes de moda.

Klesmer sintió renacer algo de la excitación del día anterior, que le llevó a razonar de una forma un poco más suelta de la forma amistosa que poco antes se había propuesto. Había intentado con toda la delicadeza posible que Gwendolen se diera cuenta que no encajaba en un camino tan difícil y peligroso; pero era su costumbre enojarse con las pretensiones de incompetencia, y corría el peligro de exasperarse. Consciente de ello, hizo de repente una pausa. Pero la impresión general de Gwendolen fue que todavía no le había denegado el poder de hacer lo que fuera mejor en este sentido. El fervor de Klesmer parecía ser una especie de *glamour*, pues él ya era propenso a ese tipo de manifestaciones; y lo que ella deseaba asegurarle era que no tenía miedo de las dificultades iniciales. Sabía que presentarse en público sobre el escenario no era como hacer lo mismo en la vida privada, que sería como quitarse un trozo de piel —no podía despellejarse sin sangre ni dolor—. Así que dijo, en un tono de cierta insistencia:

—Estoy totalmente preparada para sobrellevar las dificultades iniciales. Por supuesto, nadie puede ser famoso de buenas a primeras. Y no es necesario que todo el mundo llegue a lo más alto, ya sean actrices o cantantes. Si usted fuera tan amble de decirme cuáles son los pasos que tengo que tomar, yo tendré la fuerza de voluntad de tomarlos. No me importa tener que subir un gran monte. Será más sencillo que caminar por el nivel plano que representaría ser una institutriz. Tomaré todos los pasos que usted me recomiende.

Klesmer se convenció ahora de que debía hablar claramente.

—Le diré los pasos, no que yo le recomiendo, sino que le serán impuestos a la fuerza. Da lo mismo, de hecho, cuál sea su objetivo, si la perfección, la celebridad, o el ser un artista de segunda o de tercera fila, es exactamente lo mismo. Debe ir a la ciudad bajo la protección de su madre. Debe ejercitarse todo lo que pueda, en el sentido musical, dramático, teatral, cualquier cosa que desee hacer, primero tendrá que aprenderla… —Aquí Gwendolen le miró como si fuera a hablar, pero Klesmer levantó la mano y dijo con decisión—: Ya lo sé. Usted ha ejercitado sus talentos, recita, canta, pero desde el punto de vista de la sala de estar. Mi querida señorita, tiene que desaprender todo eso. No ha comprendido lo que significa la excelencia: debe olvidar las veces que erróneamente se la ha admirado. Debe saber por lo que debe luchar, y

entonces debe someter su cuerpo y su mente a una disciplina ininterrumpida. Su mente, digo. Pues no debe pensar en la celebridad: aparte esa idea de su vista y fíjese solo en la excelencia. Podría ser que no ganara nada de dinero, podría no conseguir ningún contrato durante un tiempo. Necesitará dinero para usted y su familia. Pero eso —aquí Klesmer frunció el ceño y sacudió los dedos como para despachar una trivialidad—, eso podría encontrarse tal vez.

Gwendolen fue enrojeciendo y palideciendo a medida que escuchaba. Su orgullo había sufrido un terrible ataque, y la última frase todavía hurgó más en la herida. Era consciente de que se le notaba alterada, e intentó escapar de su debilidad caminando de repente hacia un asiento y señalando una silla a Klesmer. Él no la cogió, pero se giró un poco para estar enfrente de ella y se apoyó en el piano. En ese momento, ella habría querido no haber ido en su busca: la primera experiencia de tener que enfrentarse en otros terrenos distintos al de su rango social y su belleza le estaba resultando muy amarga. Klesmer, preocupado con un propósito más serio, continuó sin cambiar de tono.

—Bien, y podría preguntarse qué cabría esperar sinceramente de toda esta autonegación. Sería conveniente estar al tanto de ello. Se lo diré con confianza. El desenlace sería incierto y, con bastante probabilidad, no valdría mucho la pena.

Ante estas palabras implacables, Klesmer adelantó sus labios y miró a través de sus anteojos con el aspecto de un monstruo impenetrable por la belleza.

Los ojos de Gwendolen comenzaron a arder, pero el temor a mostrar debilidad la obligó a autocontrolarse. Se obligó a decir en un tono duro:

—Usted cree que me falta talento, o que soy demasiado mayor para empezar.

Klesmer hizo una especie de murmuro que descendió en un enfático sí.

—El deseo y la práctica deberían haber empezado hace siete años… o incluso bastante antes. El hijo de un charlatán que ayuda a su padre a ganar unos peniques cuando tiene seis años, o un niño que hereda una voz prodigiosa de una larga generación de cantantes de coro y que aprenden a cantar como aprenden a hablar, tienen unos inicios más prometedores. Cualquier logro grande en la actuación o en la música cuesta más a medida que se es más mayor. Siempre que un artista ha sido capaz de decir: «Vine, vi, vencí», ha sido al final de mucha práctica paciente. La genialidad, al principio, es poco más que una gran capacidad para recibir disciplina. Cantar

y actuar, como la perfecta destreza del malabarista con sus aros y balones, requiere que los órganos se moldeen hacia la consecución de un efecto cada vez más preciso. Los músculos, todo el conjunto, deben estar compenetrados al milímetro, como un reloj. Ese es el trabajo de la primavera, antes de que se establezcan los hábitos.

—No pretendía ser un genio —dijo Gwendolen, creyendo todavía que podría de alguna manera hacer lo que Klesmer estaba pintando como imposible—. Solo creía que tenía cierto talento, el suficiente para mejorar.

—Eso no lo niego —dijo Klesmer—. Si usted hubiera empezado por el buen camino hace unos años y hubiera trabajado bien, podría cantar ahora en público, aunque no creo que su voz habría despertado mucho interés. Para el escenario podrían haber servido sus encantos personales y su inteligencia sin el actual inconveniente de la inexperiencia, sin la carencia de disciplina e instrucción.

Ciertamente Klesmer parecía cruel, pero su intención era toda la contraria. Nuestros razonamientos, incluso cuando estamos convencidos, no pueden seguir su curso únicamente de un impulso; pero el de Klesmer estaba absolutamente guiado por la compasión que sentía por la ilusión ignorante de la pobre Gwendolen de seguir un camino en el que él veía todos los detalles desdichados con una claridad que no habría podido definir si lo hubiera visto desde su punto de vista.

Gwendolen, sin embargo, no estaba convencida. Su autoestima volvió a incrementarse, y dado que el consejero al que había llamado le había dado una opinión tan perentoria, se sintió tentada a pensar que su juicio no solo era falible sino sesgado. Se le ocurrió que podía haber dado un paso más simple e inteligente mandando una carta por correo al director de un teatro de Londres, pidiéndole una cita. Ya no haría más referencias al canto: Klesmer, por lo que vio, se había puesta en contra de que cantara. Pero se vio capaz de seguir discutiendo con él sobre la posibilidad de subir a los escenarios, y le respondió con tono firme:

—Entiendo, por supuesto, que nadie puede convertirse de repente en una actriz consumada. Es imposible determinar de antemano si podré tener éxito; pero eso no me parece una razón para no intentarlo. Debería haber pensado en conseguir un contrato en un teatro mientras tanto, para ganar dinero y estudiar al mismo tiempo.

—No se puede hacer eso, mi querida señorita Harleth, estoy hablando claramente, no se puede hacer. Debo quitarle esa idea de la cabeza, que no

tiene más semejanza con la realidad que una pantomima. Muchas damas y caballeros creen que cuando se han arreglado y se ponen unos guantes están tan presentables para un escenario como en su sala de estar. Ningún director piensa eso. Con toda su gracia y encanto, si usted fuera a presentarse como aspirante al escenario, cualquier director le requeriría pagar como aprendiz por permitirle actuar, o bien le diría que fuera a que le enseñaran, y que practicara para poder actuar bien sobre el escenario, de la misma manera que un caballo, por hermoso que sea, debe ser entrenado para el circo; por no decir nada del estudio que necesita para dar vida a un personaje de forma consistente, y animarlo con el lenguaje natural del rostro, los gestos y el tono. Que consiga inmediatamente un papel apropiado para usted queda fuera de toda cuestión.

—De verdad que no puedo entender eso —dijo Gwendolen, con cierto orgullo; luego, controlándose, añadió en otro tono—. Le agradecería que me explicara cómo sucede que actrices tan pobres consiguen que las contraten. He estado en el teatro varias veces, y estoy segura de haber visto a actrices que me parecían no actuar nada bien y que eran del todo vulgares.

—Ah, mi querida señorita Harleth, esa es la crítica fácil del comprador. Cuando vamos a comprar zapatillas, despreciamos unas u otras por burdas; pero hubo un proceso de aprendizaje para lograr hacerlas. Perdóneme: usted no podría en la actualidad enseñar nada a esas actrices; pero hay mucho ciertamente que ellas podrían enseñarle a usted. Por ejemplo, ellas pueden impostar su voz para que se las pueda oír; apuesto a que usted no podría hacerlo hasta después de muchos intentos. Solo estar y moverse por el escenario es un arte, requiere mucha práctica. Se entiende que no estamos hablando de una comparsa en un teatro insignificante que gana los honorarios de una costurera. Eso queda fuera de toda cuestión para usted.

—Por supuesto debo ganar más que eso —dijo Gwendolen, estremeciéndose al pensar que podía ganar tan poco. Parecía preocuparle más eso que las objeciones de Klesmer—. Pero creo que podría aprender pronto a hacer bastante bien todas esas pequeñas cosas que ha mencionado. No soy tan estúpida. E incluso en París estoy segura de haber visto a dos actrices haciendo el papel de señoras importantes que no eran señoras en absoluto y además eran bastante feas. Supongo que no tengo un talento particular, pero debo considerar que es una ventaja, incluso para el escenario, ser una señora y no un perfecto espanto.

—Ah, vamos a ver si podemos entendernos —dijo Klesmer, buscando otra vía—. Yo estaba hablando por lo que tendría usted que pasar si pretendiera convertirse en una verdadera artista, si tomara la música y el drama como una vocación suprema en la que se esforzara por llegar a la excelencia. En ese sentido, lo que he dicho es absolutamente cierto. Encontraría, después de veintiún años educada en hacer las cosas con calma, grandes dificultades en el estudio; encontraría mortificaciones en el trato que se le otorgase al presentar sus habilidades; se le sometería a pruebas; la gente dejaría de fingir que no ven sus errores. Al principio solo sería aceptada a prueba. Tendría que soportar lo que yo llamo una manifiesta insignificancia; debería ganarse cualquier éxito con infinita paciencia. Debería mantener su sitio entre una multitud, y después de todo, es probable que ni siquiera conservase ese puesto y se perdiera de vista. Si está dispuesta a afrontar esas dificultades y aún así seguir intentándolo, tendrá usted la dignidad de un propósito elevado, aún a sabiendas de que puede haberse equivocado en la elección. Conservará cierto mérito, aunque no gane ningún premio. Me ha preguntado mi opinión sobre sus posibilidades de éxito. No pretendo hablar de forma absoluta; pero midiendo las probabilidades, mi opinión es: usted conseguirá apenas algo más que la mediocridad.

Klesmer había enfatizado sus palabras con rapidez, y entonces hizo una pausa. Gwendolen no se movía, mirándose las manos, una encima de la otra sobre su falda, hasta que el largo y profundo *Pero* con el que continuó, le produjo un efecto de sorpresa que la hizo volver a mirarle.

—Pero, hay ciertamente otras ideas, otras actividades mediante las cuales una joven señorita puede participar del arte y comparecer ante el público. Puede confiar en el incuestionable poder de su belleza como pasaporte. Puede desear exhibirse ante una admiración que prescinde de la habilidad. Es posible en algunos casos en el teatro, no en la música; pero en el escenario se acepta la belleza cuando no se tiene nada mejor que ofrecer. Aunque tampoco se consigue sin esfuerzo: como he dicho antes, la técnica, en cualquier caso, se tiene que dominar. Pero salvo esto, lo demás no tiene que ver nada con el arte. La mujer que sigue esta carrera no es una artista: normalmente se trata de una mujer que piensa conseguir una vida lujosa por un camino fácil y corto, tal vez mediante el matrimonio, esa es su mejor oportunidad, aunque también la más inusual. Con todo, su carrera puede no ser lujosa en sus inicios: puede que apenas gane para su propio pan inmediatamente, y las indignidades a las que tendrá que someterse son tales que prefiero no hablar de ellas.

—Yo deseo ser independiente —dijo Gwendolen, herida profundamente y algo confusa, recelando que hubiera cierto desprecio en las palabras de Klesmer—. Esa era la razón por la que pregunté si no podía conseguir un contrato inmediato. Por supuesto, no puedo saber cómo funcionan las cosas en los teatros. Pero pensaba que podía conseguir ser independiente. No tengo dinero, y no aceptaré ayuda de nadie.

Su orgullo herido no podía dejar de pronunciar este descargo de responsabilidad. Era intolerable que Klesmer hubiera imaginado que ella esperaba alguna otra ayuda de él además de consejo.

—Es duro que diga eso de sus amigos —dijo Klesmer, recobrando ese tono amable con el que había empezado la conversación—. Le he causado dolor. Era inevitable. Estaba obligado a presentarle la verdad, la verdad desnuda ante usted. Yo no he dicho, ni lo diré, que usted hará mal en escoger el difícil y tortuoso camino de una artista esforzada. Tiene que comparar sus dificultades con las que supone un trabajo menos arriesgado, cualquier vía más privada que se abra ante usted. Si usted elige la opción más aventurada, le pediré que nos despidamos estrechándonos la mano por la fuerza de nuestra fraternidad, donde todos profesamos nuestro servicio al Arte, al que servimos ayudando a cualquier servidor suyo.

Gwendolen permanecía en silencio, mirándose de nuevo las manos. Se sentía muy lejos de tomar la resolución que la obligaría a la aceptación; y tras uno o dos instantes, Klesmer continuó aún más serio:

—Allí donde hay el deber del servicio debe haber también el deber de aceptarlo. No es una cuestión de obligación personal. Y con respecto a los temas prácticos que inmediatamente afectan a su futuro, permítame mencionar en confidencia un asunto mío propio. Estoy esperando un acontecimiento que me facilitaría esforzarme en su favor para ampliar las oportunidades de su instrucción y residencia en Londres, bajo el cuidado, eso sí, de su familia, sin que tenga usted que preocuparse. Si cree que el arte le va a suponer la necesidad de pan y de estudio, preocúpese de momento solo del estudio; encontrará el pan sin problemas. El acontecimiento al que me refiero es mi matrimonio; de hecho, se lo cuento en confidencia, mi matrimonio con la señorita Arrowpoint, que con mucha más razón justificará que usted me confíe como amigo suyo. Su amistad habrá aumentado considerablemente para ella al cargar con tan generosa labor.

El rostro de Gwendolen había comenzado a encenderse. Que Klesmer fuera a casarse con la señorita Arrowpoint no le sorprendía en absoluto, y en

otro momento se habría divertido imaginando rápidamente las escenas que debían haber ocurrido en Quetcham. Pero lo que la mantenía absorta, lo que ahora ocupaba por entero su imaginación, era el panorama de su propio futuro inmediato que las palabras de Klesmer parecían haber desplegado. La sugerencia de que la señorita Arrowpoint fuera su patrona era un detalle más que se añadía a lo repulsivo del asunto: la propuesta de Klesmer de ayudarla añadía una irritación adicional tras la opinión humillante que había mostrado sobre sus capacidades. Sus palabras habían mordido de verdad su autoestima, dejando el dolor de una herida sangrante; y tuvo que desechar la idea de pedir otras opiniones por el temor de que también fueran severas: podían también no reconocerle el talento del que ella era consciente. Pero se controló, y se levantó de su asiento antes de articular su respuesta. Parecía natural que ella se lo tomara con calma. Se dirigió al piano, y miró distraída las hojas de las partituras, pellizcando las esquinas. Finalmente se volvió hacia Klesmer y dijo, casi con su habitual aspecto de indiferencia orgullosa, que en esta entrevista no se había mostrado hasta entonces:

—Le felicito sinceramente, Herr Klesmer. Creo que nunca he visto a nadie más admirable que la señorita Arrowpoint. Y tengo que agradecerle por todos los signos de amabilidad de esta mañana. Pero no puedo decidir ahora. Si tomo la decisión de la que ha hablado, con su permiso, se lo haré saber. Pero me temo que los obstáculos son demasiado grandes. En cualquier caso, le estoy profundamente agradecida. Fue muy atrevido por mi parte pedirle que considerara este problema.

Klesmer pensó por dentro: «Nunca me lo hará saber». Pero mostrando su más profundo respeto dijo:

—Diríjase a mí cuando quiera. Hay una dirección en esta tarjeta que le permitirá encontrarme sin demora.

Cuando ya había cogido su sombrero y se disponía a hacer una leve inclinación, Gwendolen, sintiéndose algo mejor, y consciente de que el perspicaz Klesmer debía haber advertido su ingratitud, hizo un esfuerzo desesperado por recuperar su dignidad entre las sofocantes sensaciones de la decepción egoísta y la irritación. Con una mirada de su antigua alegría, le tendió la mano, y le dijo con una sonrisa:

—Si tomo el camino equivocado, no será por sus halagos.

—¡Dios no permita que usted siga más camino que el que le procure felicidad! —dijo Klesmer, fervientemente. Luego, rozó ligeramente sus dedos

con los labios a la manera extranjera, y al siguiente instante ella ya oía el sonido de las ruedas alejándose por el camino de gravas.

Gwendolen no se había sentido tan miserable en su vida. Ni un pequeño sollozo ni un torrente de lágrimas acudieron para aliviarla. Sus ojos estaban encendidos; y el mediodía solo trajo consigo una claridad más triste de la ausencia de interés de su vida. Todos los recuerdos, todos los objetos, las partituras desplegadas, el piano abierto, su mismo reflejo en el espejo, le parecieron tan ridículos como los embalajes de una feria ambulante cuando se marcha. Por primera vez desde que tenía conciencia, se veía a sí misma en el nivel más común, y había perdido el sentido innato de que existían razones por las que ella no debía ser despreciada, dejada a un lado, apartada, ser tratada como un pasajero de tercera clase, a pesar de no estar de acuerdo con ello. No se movió ni un ápice; las perspectivas que dejaba la decepción eran demasiado opresivas y preocupantes; se dejó caer en la esquina que quedaba a la sombra del canapé, y se apretó los párpados calientes con sus dedos. Cada palabra pronunciada por Klesmer parecía haber sido sellada en su memoria, como ocurre con las palabras que traen consigo un nuevo conjunto de impresiones y que nos marcan una época. Solo unas pocas horas antes, sus labios esbozaban una floreciente sonrisa de satisfacción mientras se imaginaba vagamente un futuro adaptado a sus deseos: le parecía que sería cosa de un año o así convertirse en la Julieta más aclamada de la época; o bien, si Klesmer apoyaba su idea de ser cantante, seguir más gradualmente los pasos que la encumbrarían en la ópera, donde ganaría dinero y aclamaciones con solo algunas actuaciones ocasionales. ¿Por qué no? En casa, en la escuela, entre sus conocidos, estaba acostumbrada a que los demás admitieran su superioridad natural; y se había movido entre una sociedad en la que todo, desde las leyes de la aritmética hasta el arte sublime, era del tipo *amateur* y donde cortésmente se suponía que no alcanzaba la perfección solo porque los caballeros y las damas no estaban obligados a hacer más de lo que les gustaba; de otra forma producirían escritos más competentes y se mostrarían como artistas más imponentes que los que el mundo tiene que soportar en la actualidad. Esas visiones confiadas que la habían engañado no eran tan raras como se podría creer; al menos había mostrado algo de racionalidad al consultar a la persona que más sabía y que menos la había lisonjeado. Al pedir el consejo de Klesmer, sin embargo, había creído más en su admiración latente que en la posibilidad de que hubiera una opinión desfavorable escondida tras sus ligeras objeciones a su forma de cantar; y la verdad por la

que había preguntado con la expectativa de que sería agradable había descendido sobre ella como una correa lacerante.

«Demasiado mayor… debería haber empezado hace siete años… no conseguirá alcanzar, en el mejor de los casos, más que la mediocridad… trabajo duro, incesante, admiración incierta… el pan podría ser escaso y tardar en llegar, o no llegar en absoluto… mortificaciones, la gente ya no fingirá más no ver sus errores… manifiesta insignificancia…» todas estas frases la exasperaban; y todavía era más irritante la insinuación que a ella solo se le podía aceptar en el escenario como a una belleza que aspiraba a encontrar marido. No había dado una forma precisa a las «indignidades» con las que podría encontrarse, pero la mera asociación de cualquier cosa llamada «indigna» con ella levantaba la alarma para sentirse ofendida. Y entre las imágenes confusas causadas por esas palabras hirientes, se formó un concepto bien definido de lo desagradable, algo que jamás su experiencia anteriormente le había permitido imaginar. ¿Cómo iba a poder llevar a su mamá y a sus cuatro hermanas a Londres, si no le era posible ganar dinero de forma inmediata? Y en cuanto a someterse a ser una protegida, y pedir a su mamá que se sometiera con ella a la humillación de ser sustentada por la señorita Arrowpoint, era algo tan horrible como ser una institutriz; no, peor; pues si al final su estudio fuera tan inútil como preveía claramente Klesmer, la sensación de haber recibido favores que no podía pagar amargaría aún más el sufrimiento de la decepción. Klesmer tenía sin duda magníficas ideas para ayudar a los artistas; pero ¿cómo iba a saber los sentimientos de las señoras en tales materias? Todo se había ido al traste: había confiado en una esperanza equivocada, y había llegado a su fin.

—¡Ha llegado a su fin! —dijo Gwendolen en voz alta, saltando de su asiento al oír los pasos y las voces de su mamá y sus hermanas viniendo de la iglesia. Fue corriendo al piano y empezó a ordenar sus partituras con presunta diligencia, mientras la expresión de su cara pálida y sus ojos encendidos habrían encajado con los de una mujer que sufriera una injusticia de la que no estaba resentida, pero de la que probablemente se vengaría.

—Bien, cariño —dijo la amable señora Davilow al entrar—, veo por las marcas de las ruedas que Klesmer ha estado aquí. ¿Estás satisfecha con la entrevista? —Intuía de qué se trataba, pero le dio miedo de insinuárselo.

—¿Satisfecha, mamá? Oh, sí —dijo Gwendolen en un tono alto y seco, por el que se debe excusarla, puesto que temía implicar sus emociones en la escena. Si no se proponía resueltamente fingir una orgullosa indiferencia,

sentía que podía caer en un arrebato pasional de desesperación, que hundiría a su madre más profundamente que todo el resto de calamidades.

—A tus tíos les decepcionó no verte —dijo la señora Davilow, acercándose al piano y observando los movimientos de Gwendolen—. Les dije tan solo que querías descansar.

—Muy bien, mamá —dijo Gwendolen, en el mismo tono, volviéndose para empezar a tocar.

—¿No voy a saber nada ahora, Gwendolen? ¿Voy a estar siempre a oscuras? —dijo la señora Davilow, demasiado sensible a la actitud y la expresión de su hija para no temer que había ocurrido algo doloroso.

—De verdad que no hay nada que decir ahora, mamá —dijo Gwendolen, todavía en un tono chillón—. Tenía una idea equivocada de algo que podía hacer. Herr Klesmer me ha desengañado. Eso es todo.

—No mires ni hables de esa forma, mi querida hija: no lo puedo soportar —dijo la señora Davilow, perdiendo el control. Sentía un terror inexplicable.

Gwendolen la miró durante un momento en silencio, mordiéndose el labio inferior; luego fue hacia ella, y poniendo sus manos sobre los hombros de su mamá, dijo bajando lo máximo posible el tono:

—Mamá, no me hables ahora. Es inútil llorar y gastar nuestras fuerzas sobre lo que no puede cambiarse. Vivirás en la cabaña de Sawyer y yo iré a casa de las hijas del obispo. No hay más que hablar. Las cosas no pueden cambiarse, ¿y qué más da? A nadie le importa lo que hagamos. Debemos procurar no preocuparnos por nosotras. No debemos flaquear. Temo que nos vengamos abajo. Ayúdame a permanecer tranquila.

La señora Davilow parecía una niña asustada bajo la mirada y la voz de su hija: dejó de llorar y se retiró en silencio.

Capítulo 24

> Cuestiono a las cosas y no encuentro
> a ninguna que me responda,
> y todo el mundo me parece sombrío.
>
> WORDSWORTH[119]

GWENDOLEN ESTABA CONTENTA DE HABER MANTENIDO SU ENTREVISTA CON KLESMER antes de encontrarse con sus tíos. Había aceptado que todo iba a ser desagradable a partir de ahora, y se sintió capaz de mantener una calma obstinada ante cualquier humillación que se le pusiera por delante.

La reunión no se celebró hasta el lunes, día en que Gwendolen fue a la Rectoría con su mamá. Habían pasado por la cabaña de Sawyer en el camino, y habían visto cada una de las grietas de las estrechas habitaciones a través de la luz de mediodía que se colaba por las celosías y cortinas; aún no se había amueblado con lo que sobraba de la Rectoría.

—¿Cómo podréis sobrellevarlo, mamá? —dijo Gwendolen, mientras salían de ella. No había abierto la boca mientras habían estado mirando el suelo y las paredes desnudas, el pequeño jardín con los restos de coles, y los tejos llenos de polvo y telarañas—. ¿Las cuatro chicas y tú, todas en esa habitación-armario, con el empapelado verde y amarillo casi encima vuestro? ¿Y sin mí?

—En parte, será un consuelo que tú no lo tengas que soportar también, querida.

—Si no fuera por que tengo que ganar algo de dinero, preferiría estar aquí que ser una institutriz.

—No te pongas en contra de ello de antemano, Gwendolen. Si vas al palacio, estarás rodeada de lujo. Y ya sabes cuánto te ha importado siempre eso. No lo encontrarás tan duro como subir y bajar por esas escaleras estrechas y escarpadas, y oír el ruido de la vajilla de barro por la casa, y a las queridas niñas hablando.

—Es como una pesadilla —dijo Gwendolen, impetuosamente—. No puedo creer que mi tío te deje ir a un sitio así. Debería haber tomado otras medidas.

—Sé más razonable, querida. ¿Qué otra cosa podía haber hecho?

—Era su problema encontrar otra cosa. Me parece que el mundo es increíble si gente de nuestra posición puede hundirse de esta forma de repente —dijo Gwendolen, la cual estaba versada en otros mundos construidos de forma que se adaptaran perfectamente con su propio futuro.

Era por su temperamento que hablaba de esta forma ante la presión de estos reveses completamente nuevos: podía haber hablado de forma más delicada acerca de las vicisitudes de la vida de los demás, aunque nunca tuvo tanta aspiración a expresarse virtuosamente como de forma sagaz, un punto a tener en cuenta como atenuación de sus palabras, que normalmente eran peores que lo que era ella.

Y a pesar de sentir profundamente sus heridas, fue capaz de tener ciertos remordimientos cuando sus tíos la recibieron con mayor cariño y amabilidad que el que le habían mostrado anteriormente. No pudo más que sentirse sorprendida por la digna jovialidad con la que hablaban de las restricciones necesarias en su forma de vivir y en la educación de los chicos. El verdadero valor del carácter del señor Gascoigne, que las oportunidades mundanas ocultaban un poco, de la misma manera que los requerimientos de la moda en el vestir ocultan la belleza poética de las mujeres, quedó bien patente ante esta repentina reducción económica. Cumplidor y metódico, no solo se había desembarazado del carruaje, sino que había recuperado sus ropas usadas, había abandonado la costumbre de comer carne en los desayunos, pasaba sin periódicos, había sacado a Edwy de la escuela y él mismo impartía a todos sus chicos algunas horas de estudio, y había ordenado a todo el personal ahorrar lo máximo posible. Para todas las personas sanas, el dinero otorga ciertos placeres; y el espíritu del Rector se había extendido por toda la casa. La señora Gascoigne y Anna, que siempre hacían de su papá su modelo, no perdieron en realidad nada de lo que querían, y sintieron sinceramente que la parte más triste de sus pérdidas era el cambio de la señora Davilow y sus hijas.

Por primera vez Anna sintió compasión de Gwendolen después de su resentimiento por el asunto de Rex; y la señora Gascoigne esperaba que las dificultades tuviesen un efecto saludable sobre su sobrina, aunque no iba ella a aumentar este beneficio añadiendo más penas. Habían estado ambas ocupadas pensando cómo obtener de los almacenes de la casa algunas persianas y cortinas para la cabaña; pero dejaron de lado discretamente estos asuntos y comentaron primero el viaje de Gwendolen, y lo que iba a confortar a su mamá tenerla de nuevo en casa.

De hecho, no había nada que justificara que Gwendolen extendiera su insatisfacción con los acontecimientos a las personas más cercanas que la rodeaban, y se sintió intimidada, como si hubiera oído el toque de una campana que debía obedecerse, cuando su tío empezó con una voz amable pero firme a hablarle de los esfuerzos que había estado haciendo para conseguirle una situación que le ofreciera tantas ventajas como fuera posible. El señor Gascoigne no había olvidado a Grandcourt, pero la posibilidad de avances más serios en esa dirección era algo demasiado vago para que un hombre de un sentido común como el suyo confiara solo en ello: las incertidumbres de ese tipo no debían impedir que hiciera lo mejor que pudiese por su sobrina bajo las circunstancias presentes.

—Pensé que no había tiempo que perder, Gwendolen; pues una posición en una buena familia donde tendrás cierta consideración no es fácil de conseguir enseguida. Y por mucho que esperáramos apenas podríamos conseguir una en la que estuvieras mejor que en la del Obispo Mompert. Tanto él como la señora Mompert me conocen, y eso es, por supuesto, una ventaja para ti. De momento todo ha ido bien por correspondencia; pero no me sorprende que la señora Mompert desee verte antes de cerrar completamente el acuerdo. Quiere que te veas con ella en Wancester cuando baje a la ciudad. Supongo que pensarás que la entrevista será algo duro para ti, pero tienes algo de tiempo para hacerte a la idea.

—¿Sabes *por qué* quiere verme, tío? —dijo Gwendolen, que rápidamente había imaginado varios motivos de sospecha que supuestamente podía abrigar una imaginaria señora Mompert con tres hijas, motivos todos desagradables para la persona que debía presentarse para que la inspeccionaran.

El Rector sonrió.

—No te asustes, querida. Le gustaría tener una idea más precisa de ti de lo que mis informes pueden darle. Y una madre es naturalmente escrupulosa con la compañía que van a tener sus hijas. Le he dicho que eres muy joven. Pero ella misma supervisa estrictamente la educación de sus hijas, lo que la deja más tranquila respecto a tu edad. Es una mujer de buen gusto y principios estrictos, y se opone a tener a una persona francesa en la casa. Estoy seguro que pensará que tus modales y talentos son tan buenos como los que espera encontrar; y respecto al tema moral y religioso de la educación, ella y el mismo obispo, estarán al tanto.

Gwendolen no se atrevió a responder, pero la represión de su decidida aversión al proyecto entero envió a su rostro y su cuello un inusual y

profundo rubor, que se suavizó tan rápidamente como vino. Anna, llena de tiernos temores, puso su pequeña mano entre las de su prima; y el señor Gascoigne era un hombre demasiado afable para no darse cuenta de la prueba que este cambio repentino debía suponer para una chica como Gwendolen. Empeñado en dar una visión optimista de la situación, prosiguió en un tono relajado de observación, como si no estuviera contestando a supuestas objeciones:

—Pienso que es una posición tan elevada, que habría estado tentado de probar y dársela a Anna, si ella hubiera respondido a los requerimientos de la señora Mompert. Es verdaderamente una casa, con una continuidad en la educación en el sentido más alto: «institutriz» es un nombre equivocado. Las ideas del obispo son de un color marcadamente más propio de la iglesia baja[120] que las mías; es un amigo íntimo de Lord Grampian; pero a pesar de ser estricto en privado, no es de ninguna manera parco en asuntos públicos. Ciertamente, ha creado tan poca hostilidad en su diócesis como cualquier obispo en su cargo. Ha seguido siendo siempre amable conmigo, aunque antes de su ascenso, cuando tenía un cargo en esta diócesis, tuvimos una pequeña controversia sobre la Sociedad Bíblica.

Las palabras del Rector conllevaban un significado demasiado grato para él como para imaginar el efecto que produjeron en la mente de su sobrina. «Continuidad de la educación», «las ideas del obispo», «estricto en privado», «Sociedad Bíblica», era como si hubiera introducido para la instrucción de las señoras algunas culebras venenosas, que podían morder o picar según conviniera. Para Gwendolen, que ya temblaba por el futuro que se abría ante ella, tales frases llegaron como el creciente calor de un cristal quemándose —de ninguna manera como los vínculos de reflexión persuasiva que representaban para el buen tío—. Empezó desesperadamente a buscar una alternativa.

—Había otra situación, creo, de la que habló mamá —dijo con pleno dominio.

—Sí —dijo el Rector en un tono más bien despreciativo—; pero eso es en una escuela. No me daría la misma satisfacción que te quedaras con eso. Sería un trabajo mucho más duro, ya sabes, y no tan bueno en cualquier otro aspecto. Además, no tienes la misma oportunidad de conseguirlo.

—Oh, querida, no —dijo la señora Gascoigne—, sería un trabajo mucho más duro para ti, querida, mucho menos apropiado. Podrías no tener una habitación para ti misma. —Y los recuerdos de Gwendolen de la escuela le

sugirieron otros detalles que la obligaron a admitir ante sí misma que esta alternativa no representaría ningún consuelo. Se volvió de nuevo hacia su tío, y dijo aparentemente aceptando sus ideas:

—¿Cuándo es probable que me mande buscar la señora Mompert?

—Eso es más bien incierto, pero ha prometido no hacer caso a ninguna otra propuesta hasta haberte visto a ti. Se ha tomado muy en serio tu posición. Será durante la siguiente quincena, probablemente. Pero debo irme ahora. Voy a dejar parte de mis propiedades eclesiásticas más bien de lo normal.

El Rector terminó de hablar muy regocijado, dejando la sala con la complaciente convicción de que Gwendolen iba a adaptarse a las circunstancias como una chica sensata. Habiendo hablado apropiadamente, supuso naturalmente que los efectos serían apropiados, pues estaba acostumbrado como autoridad en su casa y en su parroquia a que le pidieran «convencer» a personas reacias, entendiendo que la medida fuese moralmente coercitiva.

—¡Qué apoyo es Henry para nosotras! —dijo la señora Gascoigne, cuando su marido hubo abandonada la sala.

—Sí que lo es —dijo la señora Davilow, cordialmente—. Creo que conservar el buen humor es un gran tesoro. Ojalá yo lo tuviera.

—Y Rex es igual que él —dijo la señora Gascoigne—. Debo contarte el consuelo que hemos tenido por una carta suya. Tengo que leerte un trozo —añadió, sacando la carta de su bolsillo, a la vez que Anna se mostraba algo asustada, sin saber por qué, salvo que había mantenido la regla de no mencionar a Rex delante de Gwendolen.

La orgullosa madre ojeó la carta, buscando frases para leer en voz alta. Pero aparentemente la encontró sembrada de lo que podrían parecer alusiones más cercanas de lo que deseaba al pasado reciente, pues alzó la mirada, doblando la carta, y dijo:

—No obstante, nos cuenta que nuestro problema ha hecho de él un hombre; ve en ello una razón para ponerse a trabajar: pretende conseguir una beca, reunir unos cuantos alumnos, hacer que vaya con él uno de sus hermanos, y ser lo más provechoso posible. La carta está llena de alegría… como él. Dice: «Dile a mi madre que ha puesto un anuncio para un hijo suyo avispado y trabajador, a tiempo de evitar que tomara ese barco, y yo mismo me ofrezco para ese puesto». La carta llegó el viernes. Nunca vi a mi marido tan emocionado por algo desde que Rex nació. Parecía la contrapartida que compensaba nuestra pérdida.

La carta, de hecho, fue lo que ayudó a la señora Gascoigne y a Anna a mostrar hacia Gwendolen una amabilidad sincera; y ella misma se sintió muy cómoda sobre el tema, sonriendo a Anna y pellizcando su barbilla como diciendo: «Ya no te tiene por qué afectar, ¿verdad?». No es que tuviera una naturaleza malévola gratuita o que disfrutara de forma egoísta haciendo miserables a los hombres. Solo se oponía intensamente a que la hicieran a ella miserable.

Pero cuando la conversación giró en torno al amueblamiento de la cabaña, Gwendolen no se sintió llamada a poner ni el más mínimo interés. Pensó que ya había hecho todo lo que podía esperarse de ella esa mañana, e incluso sintió que había llegado a un nivel heroico al guardarse para ella la lucha que se desarrollaba en su interior. El retroceso que representaba para ella la única perspectiva definitiva que se le permitía era más fuerte de lo que se había imaginado de antemano. La idea de presentarse ante la señora Mompert la primera vez, ser admitida o rechazada, era como una presión sobre una herida ya de por sí dolorosa; incluso como institutriz, parecía, iba a ser juzgada y cabía la posibilidad de ser desestimada. Después del daño que se había infligido al aceptar al obispo y su mujer, todavía quedaba por considerar si la aceptarían a ella; era su responsabilidad decidir si mirar, hablar o callar. E incluso cuando hubiera entrado en su triste tarea de anularse a sí misma dentro de la sociedad de tres chicas a las que estaría obligada incesantemente a educarlas, continuaría el mismo proceso de inspección: siempre tendría la supervisión de la señora Mompert; siempre habría alguna que otra cosa que no le apeteciera en absoluto y que se esperaría de ella que hiciese; y tal vez el obispo la interrogaría sobre temas serios. Gwendolen, acostumbrada últimamente al éxito social de una bella chica, cuyo atrevimiento jovial en el hablar tenía el matiz del ingenio, y que seis semanas antes habría sentido lástima de la estupidez del obispo en vez de sentirse avergonzada por él, vio la vida que se le avecinaba como la entrada a una penitenciaria. Le asaltaron pensamientos alocados de escaparse para ser una actriz, a pesar de Klesmer, seduciéndola la libertad; pero aún tenía fuertemente clavadas en el alma sus palabras; habían asustado a su orgullo e incluso a su dignidad de doncella: con tristeza se imaginó entre gente vulgar que la tratarían con una familiaridad irrespetuosa, hombres detestables cuyas muecas y sonrisitas no la habían hasta ahora molestado gracias al potente filtro de la alta sociedad. El atrevimiento de Gwendolen no se debía ni por asomo a las ansias de aventuras; la verdadera causa era querer seguir siendo una dama; cuando

había soñado ser la protagonista de la mesa del juego, se entendía que era para que nadie la tratara con la mínima desconsideración, o presumiera de mirarla con ironía como había hecho Deronda. Haber sido protegida y mimada, y que estuvieran por sus susceptibilidades hasta el más mínimo detalle, había ido de la mano con la comida y el vestir a lo largo de su vida como algo habitual: incluso sin ningún aviso como el de Klesmer no podría habérsele ocurrido que fuera una libertad atractiva ser lanzada en dependencia solitaria a las dudosas atenciones de desconocidos. El sufrimiento en la penitenciaría episcopal sería menos repulsivo que eso; aunque por supuesto tampoco ahí estaría consentida ni estarían por sus susceptibilidades. Su rebeldía contra esta dura necesidad que le había llegado justo a ella entre todas las personas del mundo —a ella para quien se habían dado todas las circunstancias para que ocurriera algo bien diferente—, su rebeldía se fue agrandando en lugar de disminuir a medida que pasaban las horas, sin dejar de pensar en su imaginación lo que podía haber esperado de la vida y lo que en realidad iba a ser. Los problemas familiares, pensó, eran más llevaderos para cualquier otro que para ella, incluso para su pobre mamá, pues estaba acostumbrada a no disfrutar de nada. En cuanto a esperar que si iba con los Momperts y tenía paciencia, las cosas pudieran mejorar, sería estúpido albergar esperanzas después de todo lo que había pasado: sus talentos, por lo visto, nunca serían reconocidos como algo fuera de lo común, y no había una sola dirección en la que la casualidad pareciera favorecer sus deseos. Algunas chicas hermosas, que como ella, habían leído novelas en las que incluso las institutrices sencillas eran centros de atracción y se les solicitaba en matrimonio, podrían haberse consolado un poco trasladando esas imágenes a su propio futuro; pero incluso si la experiencia de Gwendolen la hubiera llevado a considerar el cortejo y el matrimonio como su Elíseo, estaba demasiado oprimida por los acontecimientos cercanos, tanto del pasado como del futuro, para proyectar sus expectativas a lo lejos. El mundo le daba náuseas, y no encontraba ninguna razón en toda su vida por la que desear vivir. No la pudo ayudar una visión religiosa de sus problemas: en su opinión estos habían sido todos causados por la conducta malvada o desagradable de otras personas; y no había nada bueno en el mundo en lo que confiar: eso es lo que sentía; cualquier otra cosa que hubiera oído decir sobre los problemas era mera palabrería, tan poco atractivo que ni siquiera había tenido ganas de memorizarlo y repetírselo. Ya fuera la dulzura del trabajo y las reivindicaciones conseguidas; el interés de la actividad interior y exterior; el

encanto indefinido de la vida como un descubrimiento perpetuo; los tributos de coraje, fortaleza y afán, que es una mezquindad no pagar ante una carga de trabajo normal; el valor supremo de la vocación del maestro; todo esto, incluso aunque se le hubiera predicado de forma elocuente, no habrían sido más que doctrinas débilmente aprehendidas; el factor que la irritaba era su invariable opinión de que, para una señora, convertirse en una institutriz, «tomar una situación», era descender en la vida y ser tratada en el mejor de los casos con un patronazgo compasivo. Y la pobre Gwendolen nunca había desasociado la felicidad de la eminencia personal y el lucimiento. Que ahora estos le fueran a abandonar, y que ella creyera que al no tenerlos no valía la pena seguir viviendo, no la diferencia mucho de nosotros, hombres y mujeres, para que no la consideremos digna de compasión, estando nosotros mismos normalmente tentados a dar una pésima opinión de las cosas en general según nuestra propia susceptibilidad y a quitarle importancia a temas que cualquier otra persona considera vitales. Ciertamente es digna de compasión una joven criatura que se halla ante el laberinto de la vida sin ninguna pista a seguir, y a quien la desconfianza en sí misma y en su buena fortuna le llega como un impacto repentino, como una hendidura en el camino por el que paseaba con cuidado.

A pesar de su buen estado de salud, su irreconciliable repugnancia la afectó incluso físicamente; sentía una especie de entumecimiento y no se podía dedicar a nada; la mínima insistencia, incluso la de que tomara su comida, la irritaba; la conversación de los demás sobre cualquier tema le parecía irracional, al no incluir su opinión ni manifestar nada que la comprendiese a ella. No tenía una naturaleza propensa a entretenerse con la idea del suicidio como otros jóvenes decepcionados: lo que la preocupaba y exasperaba era el sentimiento de que no tenía más remedio que vivir de una forma que odiaba. Evitó volver a la Rectoría: no podía soportar tener que mirar y hablar como si estuviera de acuerdo; y no podía esforzarse por mostrar interés por el mobiliario de esa cabaña horrible. La señorita Merry se había quedado a propósito para ayudar, y a gente así como a Jocosa les gustaba ese tipo de cosas. Su madre tuvo que excusarla de que no apareciera, incluso cuando Anna vino a verla. Pues la calma que Gwendolen se había propuesto mantener se había tornado en lastimosa desmotivación; pensaba: «Supongo que tendré que empezar a fingir de aquí a poco, pero ¿por qué tengo que hacerlo ahora?».

Su madre la observaba con aflicción silenciosa; y al adquirir el hábito de la ternura indulgente, empezó a pensar lo que imaginaba que pensaba Gwendolen, y a desear que las cosas cambiaran para que su querida hija fuera menos desgraciada.

Un día en que se hallaba en la habitación negra y amarilla y su madre no acababa de irse bajo el pretexto de considerar y ordenar los vestidos de Gwendolen, se levantó súbitamente para ir en busca del cofrecito que contenía sus ornamentos.

—Mamá —empezó, mirando sobre la última capa—, había olvidado estas cosas. ¿Por qué no me lo recordaste? Mira que podemos venderlas. No te importará deshacerte de ellas. Me las diste todas hace tiempo.

Levantó la bandeja de encima y miró lo que había debajo.

—Si podemos salirnos sin usarlas, querida, prefiero guardarlas para ti —dijo la señora Davilow, sentándose a su lado algo aliviada al ver que su hija empezaba a hablar de algo. Se había dado la vuelta a la relación habitual entre ellas. Ahora era la madre la que intentaba animar a la hija—. ¿Qué? ¿Cómo llegaste a poner ese pañuelo de bolsillo aquí?

Era el pañuelo con la esquina rasgada en el que Gwendolen había envuelto el collar turquesa.

—Resulta que estaba con el collar… tenía prisa —dijo Gwendolen, sacando el pañuelo y poniéndoselo en el bolsillo—. No vendas el collar, mamá —añadió, recordando lo ofensivo que había sido su rescate.

—No, querida, no; se hizo a partir de la cadena de tu querido padre. Y preferiría no vender las otras cosas. Ninguna de ellas es de gran valor. Hace tiempo que me quitaron mis mejores ornamentos.

La señora Davilow enrojeció. Normalmente evitaba cualquier referencia a esos hechos acerca del padrastro de Gwendolen como el haberse llevado las joyas de su mujer y haberlas vendido. Tras un momento de pausa, continuó:

—Y estas cosas no son para empeñarlas. Llévatelas contigo.

—No serviría de mucho, mamá —dijo Gwendolen, fríamente—. Las institutrices no llevan alhajas. Sería mejor que me dieras un uniforme liso gris y un saquito de paja, como el que llevan los niños a los que me tía les hace caridad.

—No, querida, no; no lo mires de esa manera. Estoy segura que caerás mejor a los Mompert si vas bien vestida y elegante.

—No tengo claro cómo quieren que sea los Mompert. Ya es duro tener que ser como quieren ellos —dijo Gwendolen amargamente.

—Si hay algo a lo que pondrías menos objeciones, cualquier cosa que se pueda hacer, en lugar de ir a la casa del obispo, dilo, Gwendolen. Dime lo que está en tu corazón. Lucharé por cualquier cosa que desees —dijo la madre, suplicante—. No me ocultes las cosas. Déjame que lo soportemos juntas.

—Oh, mamá, no hay nada que contar. No puedo hacer nada mejor. Debo considerarme afortunada si me toman consigo. Obtendré algo de dinero para vosotras. Eso es lo único en lo que tengo que pensar. No gastaré nada de dinero este año: tendréis las ochenta libras completas. No sé para cuánto servirá en la casa; pero no tienes que destrozarte los dedos con las punzadas de las agujas, y tienes que apartar la mirada de esas cosas que las lágrimas han dejado en tus preciosos ojos.

Gwendolen no acompañó sus palabras de caricias como solía hacer. Ni siquiera miró a su madre, si no que se estaba fijando en el collar turquesa mientras le daba la vuelta con los dedos.

—¡Bendita seas por tu ternura, querida mía! —dijo la señora Davilow, con lágrimas en los ojos—. No te desesperes porque haya nubes ahora. Eres tan joven. Debe haber una gran felicidad todavía aguardándote.

—No veo ninguna razón para esperarla, mamá —dijo Gwendolen en un tono duro; y la señora Davilow permaneció en silencio, y pensó como tantas veces había pensado anteriormente: «¿Qué pasó entre ella y el señor Grandcourt?».

—Conservaré este collar, mamá —dijo Gwendolen, apartándolo y cerrando el cofrecillo—. Pero vende las otras cosas, aunque no te aporten mucho. Pregunta a mi tío qué hacer con ellas. Está claro que yo no las usaré otra vez. Voy a ponerme el velo. Me pregunto si todas las pobres desgraciadas que se lo han puesto se sentían como yo.

—No exageres los males, querida.

—¿Cómo puede saber alguien que exagero, cuando estoy hablando de mis propios sentimientos? Yo nunca he comentado lo que sentían los demás.

Sacó de nuevo el pañuelo rasgado de su bolsillo, y envolvió deliberadamente el collar con él. La señora Davilow observó la acción con cierta sorpresa, pero el tono de las últimas palabras la desanimaron a preguntar nada.

El «sentimiento» al que hizo referencia Gwendolen con aire trágico no se explicaba por el mero hecho de que fuera a ser una institutriz: estaba envuelta en una sensación general de decepción. No era simplemente que le repeliera la idea de lo que estaba llamada a hacer, la repulsión se extendía fuera del

mundo de la penitenciaría, al no ver nada agradable dentro de ella que pudiera realizar incluso si hubiera sido libre. Naturalmente sus penas no le parecían a ella más pequeñas que las que algunos contemporáneos suyos consideraban que tenían cuando sentían que su profesión les quedaba pequeña, y tenían una convicción *a priori* de que no valía la pena desplegar sus habilidades latentes. Porque su educación hubiera sido menos cara que la de ellos, no se seguía que ella tuviera emociones más amplias o una visión intelectual más profunda. Sus penas eran femeninas; pero para ella como mujer no eran menos duras de soportar, y sintió que eran comparables a las del nivel de Prometeo.

Pero la determinación que la llevó a mantener el collar, envolverlo en el pañuelo, y levantarse para ponerlo en su neceser, donde lo había puesto por primera vez cuando le fue devuelto, era de lo más peculiar, y hasta poco razonable. Provenía de esa vena de superstición que se aferraba tanto a su confianza como a su terror, una superstición que moraba en una personalidad intensa, incluso a pesar de las razones que pudiera dar la teoría y la ciencia; cualquier temor o esperanza eran más fuertes que las razones a su favor o en su contra. Por qué de repente decidió no desembarazarse del collar no era mucho más claro para ella que por qué algunas veces se había sentido asustada de encontrarse sola en los campos: tenía un estado emocional confuso respecto a Deronda; ¿era orgullo herido y resentimiento, o cierto sobrecogimiento y confianza excepcional? Era algo vago pero dominante, lo que la impulsó a esta acción con el collar. Hay una gran cantidad de regiones desconocidas dentro de nosotros que deben tenerse en cuenta para explicar nuestras revueltas internas.

Capítulo 25

> ¿Cómo buscar el por qué en una mente reducida a la esterilidad de un egoísmo quisquilloso, en la que todos los deseos inmediatos son aburridos, y los incentivos se han ido reduciendo a una expectativa vacilante: una mente caprichosa, en la que salta de vez en cuando un impulso intermitente notablemente destacado entre la debilidad general? Es esta una condición que suele suceder a una vida que anda demasiado suelta, no moldeada por la presión de la obligación. *Nam deteriores omnes sumus licentiae*, dijo Terencio; o expresándolo en un lenguaje más familiar: el *«como quieras» es un mal consejero*.

LOS SOBERANOS DAN A CONOCER SUS INTENCIONES E INFLUYEN EN LOS FONDOS gastando muy pocas palabras. Así que, Grandcourt, tras conocer que Gwendolen había abandonado Leubronn, dejó caer de revuelo que el centro de recreo era un agujero brutal peor que Baden, observación que al señor Lush le sirvió para concluir que su patrón pretendía regresar a Diplow de inmediato. La ejecución iba a ser con toda seguridad más lenta que la intención, y de hecho Grandcourt holgazaneó durante el día siguiente sin dar ninguna orden clara de salida —tal vez porque veía que Lush era lo que estaba esperando—: se demoró en su aseo y bajó ciertamente con un aspecto descolorido pero perfectamente distinguido, como el que tienen los rostros más frescos, y con las manos llenas de color, con signos de tosca vulgaridad; se entretuvo en la terraza, en las salas de juego, en la sala de lectura, ocupándose en mostrar su indiferencia hacia los demás y hacia todo lo que estaba a su alrededor. Cuando se topó con Lady Mallinger, sin embargo, se tomó ciertas molestias, alzó su sombrero, hizo una pausa, y le demostró que escuchaba su recomendación acerca de las fuentes respondiendo:

—Sí, oí que alguien decía lo providencial que era que siempre hubiera fuentes en los sitios del juego.

—Ah, eso era una broma —dijo la inocente señora Mallinger, confundida por la lánguida seriedad de Grandcourt—, a imitación de la de la torre y los ríos, ya sabe.

—Ah, tal vez —dijo Grandcourt sin cambiar de expresión. Lady Mallinger creyó que valía la pena comentárselo a Sir Hugo, quien dijo—: Oh, querida, él no es tonto. No debes dar por sentado que no pueda darse cuenta de una broma. Puede jugar sus cartas tan bien como la mayoría de nosotros.

—Nunca me ha parecido un hombre muy sensato —dijo Lady Mallinger, excusándose. Aunque nadie lo sabía, le desagradaba encontrarse con Grandcourt, pues sentía que él era poco más que el signo viviente de su fracaso como mujer, al no haber dado un hijo a Sir Hugo. Pensaba constantemente que su marido podría arrepentirse de su elección, y si no hubiera sido tan bueno podía haberla tratado en consecuencia con cierta rudeza, ya que a los caballeros no les suele gustar que los decepcionen.

Deronda también obtuvo un reconocimiento por parte de Grandcourt, que aunque no agradecía, tuvo buen cuidado de devolver con perfecta educación. Las raíces de la costumbre eran tales que ningún razonamiento podía apartar el arraigado sentimiento de que su nacimiento no había sido visto con agrado y que la culpa había sido de su padre; y al ver que si no fuera por esta injusticia el futuro de Grandcourt podría haber sido el suyo, su orgullo le impedía comportarse de otra forma que pudiera interpretarse como un resentimiento por ese lado. Se dio cuenta que podía descender fácilmente hasta un rencor irracional y mezquino y ver el triunfo en la frustración de los demás; y estando resuelto a no caer en ese repugnante foso, giró la espalda a esos sentimientos, aferrándose a los afectos más amables que había en él. Ciertamente le fue de buena ayuda su orgullo, el orgullo de no reconocer como una desventaja para sí mismo lo que las mentes vulgares suelen exagerar, como el desharrapado equipaje de la pobreza: no iba a permitir que un hombre como Grandcourt supusiera que le tuviese envidia. Pero no hay nada que hacer contra la interpretación. Grandcourt sí que creía que Deronda, pobre diablo, del que no tenía ninguna noticia que fuera su primo por parte de su padre, estaba atormentado en su interior por su posición respectiva; por eso la presencia de esa persona menos afortunada le resultaba más satisfactoria que lo que habría sido en otras circunstancias. Una envidia imaginaria, la idea de que los demás sienten su deficiencia en comparación, es el cortejo ordinario del egoísmo; y sus perros domésticos no eran los únicos seres de los que disfrutaba ejerciendo su poder para hacerles sentir celosos. De ahí que fuera lo suficientemente cortés como para intercambiar algunas palabras con Deronda en la terraza acerca de la caza en Diplow, e incluso dijo:

—Sería mejor que viniera para una o dos cacerías cuando empezara la temporada.

Lush, no disgustado con la demora, se entretuvo muy bien, en parte chismorreando con Sir Hugo y en parte contestando a sus preguntas sobre los negocios de Grandcourt para ver si mermaba su interés en Diplow. El baronet

sabía también ya lo suficiente sobre los enredos personales de Grandcourt para que Lush se sintiera liberado de las ataduras del silencio en ese día soleado de otoño, donde no había nada más agradable que hacer durante los largos paseos que hablar libremente de un patrón tirano. Sir Hugo estaba bien dispuesto a escuchar ciertos escándalos sin mala intención, a los que le gustaba referirse como «conductas peculiares»; pero se guardaba de comentarlas con quienes se lo podían tomar demasiado seriamente. Lo que sabía de los secretos de su sobrino no la había hablado nunca con Deronda, el cual consideraba a Grandcourt como un mortal de rostro pálido, pero que no tenía intención de averiguar cómo se le había retirado el color. Lush tenía la política y la tendencia de halagar a todo el mundo cuando no había razón contraria para ello; y el baronet siempre le trató bien, como a uno de esos personajes maleables que, al frecuentar la sociedad de los caballeros, sin ser exactamente caballeros ellos mismos, pueden ser aún más prácticos, como los segundos mejores artículos de nuestro ropero, que usamos con una cómoda libertad sin ansiedad de ningún tipo.

—Bien, ya me mantendrá informado de los acontecimientos —dijo Sir Hugo—, si al final parece producirse este matrimonio, o si sucede algo más que requiera la necesidad de dinero. Mi plan sería mucho mejor para él que sobrecargar Ryelands.

—Eso es cierto —dijo Lush—, solo que no debe imponérsele, tan solo situarlo en su camino para que el aroma lo tiente. Grandcourt no es un hombre que se deje guiar por lo que constituya su propio interés; sobre todo si se le hace ver que también es para el interés de uno mismo. Yo, por supuesto, estoy atado a él. He renunciado a todo lo demás para poder estar a su lado, y ya llevo así quince años. No encontraría fácilmente a otro que ocupara mi puesto. Es un personaje peculiar, ese Heinleigh Grandcourt, y en los últimos años se ha acentuado su carácter. Sin embargo, yo tengo una naturaleza inalterable, y he sido una especie de guardián suyo desde que él tenía veinte años: era un personaje fascinante y fuera de lo común entonces, y lo podría ser ahora, si quisiera. Estoy atado a él; sería mucho peor para él si dejara que ya no trabajara codo con codo con él.

Sir Hugo no creyó necesario expresar su comprensión o incluso su asentimiento, y tal vez el mismo Lush no esperara que se tomara al pie de la letra sus breves comentarios. ¿Pero cómo puede un hombre no incluirse a sí mismo en una conversación? Y debía mantener su aseo en el lenguaje, de la misma forma que con su cuerpo y su ropa. El oyente de Lush no era

inclemente: un miembro del Parlamento podía tener en cuenta las necesidades del aseo verbal; y el diálogo continuó sin intercambio de estimación mutua.

Sin embargo, la cómoda perspectiva de Lush de dilación indefinida fue cortada de raíz a la mañana siguiente cuando Grandcourt le saludó con la pregunta:

—¿Estás preparándolo todo para que vayamos a París en tren?

—No sabía que pretendías irte —dijo Lush, que no fue exactamente cogido por sorpresa.

—Deberías haberte dado cuenta —dijo Grandcourt, mirando la parte quemada de su cigarro, y hablando en un tono bajo, usual en él cuando quería expresar su hastío y mostrarse perentorio—. Tenlo todo a punto, ¿de acuerdo? Y vigila que no nos acompañe ningún bruto en el carruaje. Y deja mis señas a los Mallinger.

En consecuencia, llegaron a París al día siguiente; pero ahí Lush se sintió satisfecho por la propuesta u orden de ir enseguida a Diplow para ver que todo estuviera en orden, mientras Grandcourt y el ayuda de cámara se quedaban atrás; y no fue hasta al cabo de algunos días que Lush recibió un telegrama para que mandara el carruaje a la estación de Wancester.

Había empleado el intersticio activamente, no solo cumpliendo las órdenes de Grandcourt sobre los sementales y la gente de la casa, sino además recopilando toda la información que pudo sobre Gwendolen, y cómo iban las cosas en Offendene. Cuáles iban a ser los efectos probables que las noticias de las desgracias de la familia tendrían sobre la obstinación intermitente de Grandcourt era algo impredecible. En tanto que la pobreza de la chica podía ser un argumento para que ella aceptara ahora su declaración a pesar de su negativa anterior, podía invalidar esa amarga objeción de temer un rechazo, cosa que Lush consideraba uno de los motivos más disuasorios de Grandcourt; por otra parte, la certeza de la aceptación era precisamente «el tipo de cosas» que podía hacerle dudar y vagar por aquí y por allá sin más voluntad aparente que una polilla. Lush había estado observando a su patrón durante muchos años, y le conocía tal vez mejor de lo que conocía cualquier otra cosa; pero conocer a Grandcourt era dudar qué es lo que haría en cada caso concreto. Podría suceder que actuara con una magnanimidad aparente, como el héroe de un drama francés moderno, cuyo repentino cambio a un esplendor moral tras años de mentiras y mezquindad, le da a uno poca confianza respecto a cómo seguirá su carrera tras la caída del telón. Ciertamente, ¿qué actitud habría sido más honorable para una escena final

que la de declinar buscar a una heredera por su dinero y decidir casarse con la chica atractiva que no tenía nada? Pero Lush estaba seguro de algunas cosas sobre Grandcourt, y una era, que de todos los cambios interiores, el de la generosidad era el menos probable que ocurriera en él. ¿De qué sirve, sin embargo, saber que un insecto no caminará con la cabeza hacia atrás, cuando lo que necesitas saber es el conjunto de estímulos internos que lo envían por un lado o por otro en un entramado de posibles caminos? Así es que Lush no tenía ni idea sobre el desenlace posible entre Grandcourt y Gwendolen, cuando lo que deseaba era la seguridad absoluta de que nunca se casarían. Habría consentido gustosamente que se casara con una heredera, o que se casara con la señora Glasher: en un caso habría habido la abundancia inmediata que el derecho a heredar no podía proporcionar; en el otro, la seguridad del agradecimiento de la mujer, pues Lush siempre había sido amigo de la señora Glasher; y que la futura señora Grandcourt no fuera socialmente aceptada no podía afectar a su comodidad privada. Tampoco le habría importado, igualmente, que no hubiera matrimonio; pero sintió que era su deber hacer todo lo que pudiera para impedir el matrimonio con una chica que probablemente no iba a traer más que problemas a su marido, por no hablar de la irritación y hasta la injuria que produciría a la antigua compañera de su marido, cuyo futuro el señor Lush deseaba de corazón que fuera lo más bueno posible, considerando que él había bien merecido esa compensación por vivir una vida de perro, aunque la de un perro que disfrutaba muchos manjares en tranquilidad, sacando provecho de su antiguo establecimiento. Deseaba para sí mismo lo que creía era bueno, y no era consciente de desear daño a nadie; a menos, quizás, un poco ahora a la inoportuna e impertinente Gwendolen. Pero también cabe encontrar en el novato menos aficionado al lujo y a la música, en el tragasapos menos dado a las náuseas, algunas susceptibilidades. Y el señor Lush estaba acostumbrado a que el mundo lo tratara como compañero apto y agradable: no se había preparado para ser insultado por más de una persona.

Con esta preparación imperfecta para una política de guerra, Lush esperaba la llegada de Grandcourt, haciendo poco más que preguntarse cómo empezaría la campaña. El primer día, Grandcourt estuvo del todo ocupado con las caballerizas, y entre otras cosas ordenó a un mozo que pusiera una silla a Criterion y le dejara revisar los pasos del caballo. Esta marcada determinación dejó a Lush pensativo sobre si debía afrontar las delicadas consecuencias de hablar en primer lugar, mientras estaba todavía seguro de

que no se había dado ningún paso comprometedor; y se levantó a la mañana siguiente casi decidido a que si Grandcourt se mostrara de tan buen humor como el día anterior y diera a pie a empezar una conversación, dejaría caer los interesantes hechos de Gwendolen y su familia, solo por ver en qué iban a afectar, y obtener algo que le sirviese de guía. Pero Grandcourt no dio pie a empezar una conversación, e incluso preguntado sobre una cuestión que le interesaba, mantuvo un silencio tan cerrado que ni un pez se habría mostrado más callado. Tras leer sus cartas dio varias órdenes para que se realizasen o fueran transmitidas por Lush, y luego se giró hacia esa persona competente que, de acuerdo con la orden, se levantó para marcharse de la sala. Pero antes de que saliera por la puerta, Grandcourt levantó ligeramente la cabeza y pronunció un débil y entrecortado:

—¡Oh!

—¿Qué ocurre? —dijo Lush, quien, hay que observar, no reaccionaba a estas salidas de forma respetuosa.

—Cierra la puerta, ¿vale? No puedo hablar de cara al pasillo.

Lush cerró la puerta, se acercó y decidió sentarse.

Tas una pequeña pausa, Grandcourt dijo:

—¿Está la señorita Harleth en Offendene? —Estaba del todo seguro que Lush había procurado averiguar cosas sobre ella, y le proporcionaba cierto placer pensar que Lush no quería que él también las averiguase.

—Bueno, apenas lo sé —dijo Lush despreocupadamente. La familia no está en una buena situación. Tanto ellos como los Gascoigne han perdido todo su dinero. Ha sido debido a algún negocio banquero engañoso. La pobre no madre no tiene un penique, parece. Ella y las chicas tendrán que apretarse en una pequeña cabaña como la de un trabajador.

—No me mientas, por favor —dijo Grandcourt, en su tono audible más bajo—. No le veo la gracia, ni la utilidad.

—¿A qué te refieres? —dijo Lush, más irritado de lo normal en él, al ver el panorama que se le venía por delante.

—Simplemente dime la verdad, ¿de acuerdo?

—No es invención mía. He oído la historia de varias personas: Bazeley, el hombre de Brackneshaw, por ejemplo. Está buscando un nuevo inquilino para Offendene.

—No me refiero a eso. ¿Está la señorita Harleth allí o no? —dijo Grandcourt en su tono anterior.

—Por mi vida que no lo sé —dijo Lush más bien malhumorado—. Puede que se fuera ayer. Oí que había aceptado un puesto como institutriz; puede que ya esté allí por lo que sé. Pero si usted quiere verla, sin duda la madre la haría volver —esta pequeña mofa se escapó de sus labios pero sin intención.

—Manda a Hutchins que averigüe si estará allí mañana.

Lush no se movió. Como mucha gente que ha pensado de antemano lo que dirá en determinadas circunstancias, se sintió animado por una inesperada irritación a expresar parte de esas cosas preconcebidas antes de que se dieran las circunstancias. Grandcourt, de hecho, iba a darse un batacazo tan grande, que era imposible dejarle dar el primer paso sin ningún signo de protesta. Lush conservó la suficiente precaución para adoptar un tono de amistad racional; con todo, se sentía seguro de su capacidad ante su patrón, y estaba preparado para mostrarse atrevido.

—Estaría bien que recordases, Grandcourt, que estás jugando con fuego. No puedes seguir flirteándola como antes, o vas a por todas o lo dejas estar. Tienes que decidir si deseas ser aceptado; e incluso más, si te lo tomarías a bien en caso de ser rechazado. O una cosa o la otra. No puedes mariposear tras ella otras seis semanas.

Grandcourt no dijo nada, pero apretó el periódico bajo sus rodillas y comenzó a encender otro cigarro. Lush interpretó esto como un signo de que estaba dispuesto a escuchar, y no quiso dejar escapar la oportunidad; quería averiguar, si era posible, cuál era la mayor causa de duda, si una probable aceptación o un probable rechazo.

—Todo tiene una pinta más seria ahora que antes. Hay que mantener a su familia. No podrías permitir que la madre de tu mujer viviera como una mendiga. Sería un asunto tremendamente complicado. El matrimonio te haría descender a un nivel al que nunca has estado acostumbrado; y en cuanto al dinero tampoco es que nades en abundancia. Y después de todo, ¿qué sacarías de ello? Eres dueño de tus fincas, presentes o futuras, así como de escoger adónde va tu herencia; es una pena estropearlo todo por un simple desvarío del que te puedes arrepentir en un año. Me daría mucha pena ver cómo arruinas tu vida de esa manera. Si hubiera algo sólido que pudiera ganarse con el matrimonio, sería otra cosa.

El tono de Lush se había ido convirtiendo gradualmente en más y más zalamero en su demostración de amigabilidad y de protesta, y estaba casi en el peligro de olvidar que estaba especulando en sus argumentos. Cuando

acabó, Grandcourt se sacó el puro de la boca, y mirando fijamente la parte húmeda mientras ajustaba la hoja con las delicadas yemas de sus dedos, dijo:

—Sabía de antes que te oponías a que me casara con la señorita Harleth —hizo una breve pausa, antes de continuar—: Pero nunca consideré que eso fuera una razón en contra.

—Nunca supuse que lo hicieras —contestó Lush, ya sin zalamería, sino secamente—. No era eso lo que yo consideraba una razón. Pensé que habría sido una razón en contra, después de toda tu experiencia, que actuaras como el protagonista de una balada, y situarte en una posición ridícula… ¿y todo para qué? Sabes que antes no podías decidirte. Es imposible que ella te importe demasiado. Y en cuanto a los ardides que es capaz de tramar, puedes juzgarlo tú mismo por lo que oíste en Leubronn. No obstante, lo que quería hacerte ver era que no puedes vacilar ahora.

—Perfecto —dijo Grandcourt, mirando a Lush fijamente con ojos rasgados—; no pretendo hacerlo. Diría que es desagradable para ti. Pero si piensas que me importa algo todo eso, estás completamente equivocado.

—Oh, bien —dijo Lush, levantándose con las manos en los bolsillos, y sintiendo como se revolvía en su interior un veneno latente—, ¡si ya lo has decidido! Solo queda otro aspecto a tener en cuenta. He estado hablando, suponiendo que era absolutamente cierto que ella te aceptase y que la pobreza extrema la obligaría a ello. No estoy tan seguro de que podamos contar con la jovencita. No creo que sea de fiar. Y tenía sus motivos cuando se escapó la otra vez. —Lush se había movido uno o dos pasos hasta quedar casi enfrente de Grandcourt, aunque a cierta distancia. No parecía muy cohibido por las consecuencias, siendo consciente de que el único punto fuerte que tenía en su posición presente era la utilidad que representaba para Grandcourt; e incluso tras una disputa, pronto o temprano volvería a necesitarle de nuevo. Previó que Gwendolen lo derrocaría por un tiempo, y en ese momento su genio le apremió a arriesgarse a una disputa.

—Ella tuvo sus motivos —repitió, más significativamente.

—Ya había llegado a esa conclusión antes —dijo Grandcourt con ironía despectiva.

—Sí, pero no creo que supieras cuáles fueron sus razones.

—Tú sí, por lo que parece —dijo Grandcourt, sin dar a entender más que por un parpadeo que le importaran los motivos.

—Sí, y sería mejor que también tú los supieras, para que juzgues la influencia que puedes tener sobre ella, si se traga sus razones y te acepta. Por

mi parte, yo no apostaría por ello. Vio a Lydia en Cardell Chase y oyó toda la historia.

Grandcourt no respondió inmediatamente, y simplemente continuó fumando. Tardó tanto antes de hablar, que Lush se hizo a un lado y miró a través de las ventanas, sin querer salir sin antes ver el efecto de su atrevida maniobra. Había esperado que Grandcourt le imputara haber tramado el asunto, dado que la señora Glasher estaba por entonces viviendo en Gadsmer, a unas cien millas, y estaba preparado para admitir el hecho. Lo que le importaba era que Grandcourt se tambaleara al darse cuenta de que iba a dar a conocer sus pretensiones a una chica que disponía de ese conocimiento y que había huido asustada por ello. Al final, Grandcourt, viendo que Lush se volvía hacia él, le miró de nuevo y le dijo con desprecio:

—¿Qué más?

Aquí hubo de verdad un «mate» en respuesta al «jaque» de Lush; y aunque su exasperación con Grandcourt era tal vez superior a lo que nunca había sido, habría sido estúpido actuar como si cualquier otra maniobra fuera a ser útil. Encogió ligeramente uno de sus hombres y se disponía a marcharse, cuando Grandcourt, girándose en su asiento hacia la mesa, dijo, tan tranquilamente como si nada hubiera pasado:

—Hazme el favor de acercarme papel y pluma.

Ningún superior, por mucho que gritara e intimidara, podía haber ejercido el imperioso efecto que hizo Grandcourt. Cómo era posible, que en lugar de ser obedecido, nunca nadie le hubiera cantado las cuarenta, era quizás un misterio para los que incluso se hallaban obedeciéndole. El papel y la pluma le fueron entregados, y mientras los tomó, dijo:

—Espera solamente a esta carta.

Hizo cuatro garabatos rápidos, y anotó la dirección de la breve nota.

—Que Hutchins la lleve inmediatamente, ¿de acuerdo? —dijo Grandcourt, apartando de él la carta.

Como Lush había esperado, estaba dirigida a la señorita Harleth, a Offendene. Cuando se enfrió su irritación se alegró de que no se hubiese producido ninguna disputa explosiva. Pero estaba seguro de que el asunto le había resultado desfavorable, y que de alguna manera u otra lo iba a pagar. También veía claro que el efecto inmediato de su revelación había sido el de fortalecer aún más la determinación anterior de Grandcourt. Pero en cuanto al modo en que se desarrollaban estas estrategias en su desconcertante mente, Lush no podía más que echar una moneda al aire en busca de una teoría.

Capítulo 26

> Trae asnos blancos cargados con mercancías,
> llenos de vasijas de Tiro, púrpuras y doradas, con bálsamos
> para corromper mi voluntad: le dejaré que me cace,
> pero no exhalaré el aire corrompido de sus conjeturas,
> mi voluntad es firme.
> Me hallo seguro,
> así que dejemos que venga a untar su cargamento,
> pues la firmeza tiene su apetito y sus ansias,
> cuanto más grande es la seducción, mayor es la resistencia;
> conoceré el tacto del oro para luego arrojarlo lejos,
> el aroma del vino lo sentirán mis labios sobrios,
> contemplaré el suave biso[121], el marfil y las plumas,
> para decir: «Es hermoso, pero no poseeré nada de esto»,
> y lo despreciaré en su misma cara.

El señor Gascoigne vino un día a Offendene con lo que suponía eran noticias satisfactorias: la señora Mompert había fijado el jueves de la semana que viene para su entrevista con Gwendolen en Wancester. No dijo nada de haber oído por casualidad que el señor Grandcourt había regresado a Diplow; de hecho, no sabía más que ella: que Leubronn había sido el destino de su admirador; y creía que sería desconsiderado por su parte, además de inútil, revivir el recuerdo de un futuro brillante bajo las actuales adversidades. En su interior, se lamentaba secretamente del incomprensible capricho de su sobrina, pero también la defendía al considerar que Grandcourt había sido el primero en comportarse de una forma extraña, al escaparse de repente en el momento en que tenía la mejor oportunidad para coronar sus marcadas atenciones. El juicio práctico del Rector le decía que su deber principal hacia su sobrina era animarla resueltamente a encarar el cambio de su fortuna, pues no se veía ningún suceso a la vista que fuera a invertir la situación.

—Encontrarás el interés en una experiencia diferente, querida, y no tengo ninguna duda de que serás una mujer más valorada por haber sufrido lo que has sufrido.

—No pretendo fingir que me va a gustar —dijo Gwendolen, por primera vez mostrando cierta jactancia ante su tío—. Pero soy del todo consciente de que estoy obligada a soportarlo.

Recordó haberse sometido a su exhortación en una ocasión diferente, en la que se esperaba de ella un futuro bien distinto.

—Y tu sensatez te enseñará a comportarte de forma adecuada en estas circunstancias —dijo el señor Gascoigne, con un matiz de más gravedad—. Estoy seguro de que la señora Mompert estará encantada contigo. Sabrás cómo dirigirte a una mujer que en todos los sentidos mantiene una relación de superioridad contigo. Esta dificultad te ha llegado siendo joven, pero, en cierto sentido, eso lo hace más llevadero, y siempre podemos sacar beneficios de los escarmientos si los aceptamos.

Esto era precisamente lo que Gwendolen era incapaz de hacer, y después de que su tío se hubiera ido, amargas lágrimas, que no le habían salido durante las últimas dificultades, afloraron y cayeron lentamente mientras se sentaba en soledad. Su corazón negaba que la dificultad fuera más llevadera porque fuera joven. ¿Cuándo le iba a llegar la felicidad, sino cuando era joven? No es que su visión de la felicidad estuviera tan idealizada y separada del sufrimiento como antes había imaginado, no es que todavía pensara que podía saborear los frutos de la vida sin desconfiar de sus consecuencias. Pero este desencanto general con el mundo —mejor dicho, consigo misma, dado que por lo que parecía no tenía casta para la preeminencia—, lo único que hizo fue intensificar su sensación de abandono: se hallaba ante un triste y largo camino visiblemente estéril, por el cual no tenía el valor de comenzar a andar. Estaba ante la primera crisis de rebelión pasional juvenil contra lo que erróneamente se denomina sufrimiento, pero que en realidad es ausencia de alegría, esa primera rabieta de decepción en el despertar de nuestra vida, que para nosotros a quienes los años de la vida han amansado solo podemos recordar de forma borrosa como parte de nuestra experiencia, y ser así intolerantes con su irracionalidad e irreverencia egoísta. ¿Qué pasión hay más absurda, cuando no nos afecta a nosotros y el desastre no es más que un riesgo colectivo, que la angustia de sentir que seremos nosotros y no los demás los que sufriremos las consecuencias? Pero quizás aquellos que han estado defendiendo con su propio cuerpo la seguridad de los demás, y han llevado sus propias heridas en heroico silencio, aquellos que últimamente han hecho grandes hazañas, de repente se sorprenden por su dolor y ante la imposibilidad de ver cumplidos sus deseos fantásticos, se enrabian como si fueran picados por cientos de avispas y el mundo se convierte para ellos en un injusto sufrimiento impuesto. Este era casi el estado de la pobre Gwendolen. ¿A qué otras chicas les había sucedido el revés de fortuna que le había

ocurrido a ella? Lo único que había estado toda la vida vigilando que no le sucediera, le había ocurrido: era lo que había sentido cuando Klesmer le había demostrado que no era lo suficientemente buena para ser dueña de su fortuna ni por fuerza de voluntad ni por mérito propio; era lo que sentiría bajo la vigilancia constante y rigurosa de la señora Mompert, bajo la pesada exigencia de mostrarse alegre con tres señoritas Mompert, bajo la necesidad de mantenerse completamente sumisa, y guardarse para ella sus opiniones. Ser una reina destronada no es tan duro como otras degradaciones: imagínese a alguien al que se le ha hecho creer en su propia divinidad que observa que ya no se le homenajea, y se ve incapaz de realizar ningún milagro que restaure la confianza y veneración de los demás. Algo semejante a esta ilusión y a esta sensación de impotencia le había sucedido a la pobre chica malcriada, de bellos ojos y labios y con un aspecto mayestático, que había perdido ahora su magia.

Se levantó del bajo otomán donde había permanecido sentada sin propósito alguno, y caminó arriba y abajo por la sala, apoyando un codo en una mano mientras reclinaba su mejilla sobre la otra, y le cayó lentamente una lágrima. Pensó: «Siempre he creído, desde que era pequeña, que mamá no era una mujer feliz; y ahora diría que voy a ser más infeliz de lo que ella ha sido». Se entretuvo por unos momentos en la imagen de sí misma perdiendo la juventud y dejando de disfrutar, sin detenerse a pensar en hacer algo en concreto: pero tal escena le llevó inevitablemente de nuevo a la imagen de su madre. «¡Pobre mamá! Será todavía peor para ella ahora. Tengo que conseguirle un poco de dinero; eso es todo por lo que tengo que preocuparme ahora». Y entonces se imaginó algo completamente nuevo, vio a su madre envejeciendo, con el cabello totalmente blanco, y se vio a sí misma ya no joven sino marchita, y sus dos rostros reencontrándose llenos de recuerdos y de amor, siendo ella consciente de lo que pasaba por la mente de su madre: «La pobre Gwen está ahora también triste y marchita»; y por primera vez sollozó, no de rabia sino con una especie de tierna compasión.

Su cara daba a la puerta y vio a su madre entrar. Apenas la vio, pues sus ojos estaban empañados de lágrimas, y se frotó enseguida con su pañuelo. Antes de apartárselo sintió los brazos de su madre a su alrededor, y esta sensación, que parecía una prolongación de su visión interior, la hizo sobreponerse y se mostró reticente; sollozó de nuevo a su pesar, mientras dejaba que sus mejillas se juntaran.

La señora Davilow traía algo en sus manos que ya le había causado a ella una gran ansiedad, y no se atrevió a hablar hasta que su querida hija se tranquilizara. Pero Gwendolen, que se había resistido siempre que había sido posible a manifestar la dolorosa exhibición de los lloriqueos, se frotó de nuevo los ojos con su pañuelo, y con un profundo suspiro volvió la cabeza hacia su madre, que estaba pálida y temblorosa.

—No era nada, mamá —dijo Gwendolen, pensando que su madre había actuado de esta forma movida por el hecho de encontrarla afligida—. Ya me ha pasado.

Pero la señora Davilow había retirado sus brazos, y Gwendolen apercibió una carta en sus manos.

—¿Qué es esa carta? ¿Todavía hay peores noticias? —preguntó, con un deje de amargura.

—No sé lo que opinarás de esto, querida —dijo la señora Davilow, conservando la carta en sus manos—. No adivinarías nunca de dónde viene.

—No me hagas adivinar nada —dijo Gwendolen, más bien impaciente, como si le estuvieran metiendo el dedo en la llaga.

—Está dirigida a ti, cariño.

Gwendolen hizo un asentimiento casi imperceptible.

—Viene de Diplow —dijo la señora Davilow, entregándole la carta.

Conocía la escritura confusa de Grandcourt, y su madre no se sorprendió de ver cómo se sonrojaba profundamente; pero al observarla mientras leía, y sin dejar de preguntarse el propósito de la carta, vio cómo su color iba disminuyendo. Los labios de Gwendolen habían perdido del todo su color cuando devolvió la nota abierta a su madre. Las palabras eran breves y formales.

> El señor Grandcourt presenta sus respetos a la señorita Harleth, y ruega saber si le puede ser permitida una visita a Offendene mañana después de las dos, y verla a solas. El señor Grandcourt acaba de regresar de Leubronn, donde había tenido la esperanza de encontrar a la señorita Harleth.

La señora Davilow la leyó, y dirigió a su hija una mirada de interrogación, dejando la nota en su mano. Gwendolen la dejó caer en el suelo, y se apartó a un lado.

—Hay que dar una respuesta, querida —dijo la señorita Davilow tímidamente—. El hombre está esperando.

Gwendolen se hundió en el canapé, entrelazó sus manos, y miró enfrente suyo, no a su madre. Tenía la expresión del que ha sido sobresaltado por un

sonido y escucha para saber de dónde procede. El cambio repentino de la situación era desconcertante. Unos pocos minutos antes, estaba pensando en un camino ineludible de repulsiva monotonía, rebelándose desesperada en su interior contra su inevitable destino que no le daba ninguna oportunidad; y justo ahora, llegaba una oportunidad. Pero ¿era una sensación de triunfo lo que experimentaba o de terror? Era imposible que Gwendolen no sintiera cierto triunfo como tributo a su poder justo en el momento en que estaba probando por vez primera la amargura de la insignificancia: de nuevo parecía recuperar el control de su propia vida. ¿Pero cómo usarlo? Aquí es donde el terror entraba en escena. Rápidamente, como las imágenes que se suceden por un libro abierto a toda prisa, acudieron vivamente a su memoria, aunque en fragmentos, todas las cosas que habían sucedido en relación con Grandcourt: la seducción, las vacilaciones, la decisión de aceptación, la repulsión final; el rostro incisivo de esa mujer de ojos oscuros con el niño encantador; su propia promesa (¿era una promesa el no casarse con él?); la nueva incredulidad en el valor de los hombres y de esas cosas por las que se había convertido en un símbolo tal manifestación. Esa experiencia inalterable le hacía imaginar tales cosas que en un primer momento, antes de que se impusiera la reflexión, se acobardaba ante un terror innato.

¿En qué consistía la ventaja de esta nueva oportunidad? ¿Qué es lo que deseaba? ¿Algo diferente? ¡No! Y, sin embargo, en las profundidades de su conciencia se estaba formando un nuevo deseo: «¡Ojalá no le hubiera conocido nunca!». ¡Ojalá hubiera sucedido cualquier cosa que la librara del temor de dejar venir a Grandcourt!

No pasó mucho tiempo, aunque sí se lo pareció a la señora Davilow, antes de que considerara oportuno decir amablemente:

—Será necesario que escribas algo, querida. ¿O escribo yo una respuesta por ti, lo que me dictes?

—No, mamá —dijo Gwendolen, dando un profundo suspiro—. Pero acércame, por favor, papel y pluma.

Era para ganar tiempo. ¿Iba a declinar la visita de Grandcourt —cerrarse la puerta—, sin siquiera ver que podría pasar, con la certeza de continuar en la misma situación? La nueva actividad que bullía en su interior se hizo un hueco entre su terror y la condujo hacia lo que sería un nuevo acontecimiento, hacia una oportunidad en la que podía mirar y hablar con su anterior efectividad. El interés por el mañana ya no estaba en punto muerto.

—Realmente no hay ninguna razón por la que te alarmes tanto por hacer esperar al hombre unos minutos, mamá —protestó Gwendolen, mientras la señora Davilow, habiendo preparado el material para escribir, la miraba expectante—. La misión de los sirvientes es esperar. No es necesario que escriba algo al acto.

—No, querida —dijo la señora Davilow, en un tono de disculpa, y disponiéndose a sentarse para retomar un trabajo manual—; puede esperar otro cuarto de hora, si quieres.

Lo que dijo y lo que hizo era algo muy simple y muy natural por su parte, pero debía estar sumamente calculado. Gwendolen sintió el deseo contradictorio de que la apresuraran: las prisas la librarían de una elección deliberada.

—No pretendía hacerle esperar tanto como para que terminaras tu trabajo de costura —dijo, levantando los brazos para acariciar los rizos terminales de su cabello, mientras se levantó de su asiento y permaneció quieta en pie.

—¿Pero y si no te sientes capaz de tomar una decisión? —dijo la señora Davilow, comprendiéndola.

—*Debo* tomar una decisión —dijo Gwendolen, dirigiéndose hacia el escritorio y sentándose. En su interior, no dejaba de correr una especie de corriente submarina, como el pensamiento de un hombre que sin dejar de hablar está pensando cómo escaparse de su situación. ¿Por qué no dejarle venir? No la comprometía a nada. Él había estado en Leubronn tras ella: estaba claro que pretendía renovar directamente y sin ninguna duda la petición que antes solo había estado implícita. ¿Y qué? Lo rechazaría. ¿Por qué iba a negarse la libertad de hacer esto, algo que le gustaría hacer?

—Si el señor Grandcourt acaba de regresar de Leubronn —dijo la señora Davilow, al observar que Gwendolen se apoyaba hacia atrás sobre la silla tras tomar la pluma en su mano—, me pregunto si habrá oído de nuestras desgracias.

—Eso no supondría ninguna diferencia para un hombre de su posición —dijo Gwendolen, con cierto desprecio.

—Lo supondría para algunos hombres —dijo la señora Davilow—. No les gustaría tomar por esposa a una mujer que proviniera de una familia en un estado casi mendicante, como lo estamos nosotras. El hecho de vivir todavía en Offendene nos protege. Pero imagínate que nos encuentra en la cabaña de Sawyer. La mayoría de los hombres tienen miedo de que se les juzgue y

censure por la familia de su mujer. Si el señor Grandcourt ya lo supiera, creo que sería una prueba de verdad de su estimación hacia ti.

La señora Davilow se expresó con un énfasis inusual: era la primera vez que se atrevía a decir algo de Grandcourt que pudiera ser interpretado claramente como un argumento a su favor, habiendo considerado siempre que tales manifestaciones eran del todo inútiles y que incluso podían volverse en contra. El efecto de sus palabras fue entonces más impactante de lo que podía imaginar: descubrieron un nuevo abanico de posibilidades para Gwendolen: se imaginó lo que Grandcourt podría hacer por su madre si ella, Gwendolen, hiciera lo que no iba a hacer. Estaba tan emocionada por un nuevo torrente de ideas, que como si pugnasen por salir a la superficie, sintió que debía realizar inmediatamente la tarea: había que escribir la carta, si no, la pospondría indefinidamente. Al final actuó con la precipitación con la que había deseado. Actuar con tal urgencia suponía conservar una razón para no tomar una decisión absoluta, y dejar abiertas tantas salidas como fuera posible.

Escribió:

> La señorita Harleth presenta sus respetos al señor Grandcourt. Estará en casa mañana después de las dos.

Antes de entregar la nota dijo:

—Te ruego que llames al timbre, mamá, si hay alguien para contestarlo —ya no sabía quién hacía el trabajo de la casa.

No fue hasta que se llevaron la carta y Gwendolen se levantó de nuevo, estirando uno de sus brazos y llevándoselo a la cabeza, con un largo gemido que llevaba en sí un sonido de alivio, que la señora Davilow se aventuró a preguntar:

—¿Qué le has dicho, Gwen?

—Le he dicho que estaría en casa —respondió Gwendolen, algo altiva. Y tras una pausa añadió:

—No debes esperar que porque venga el señor Grandcourt, va a pasar algo, mamá.

—No espero absolutamente nada, querida. Solo deseo que hagas caso a tus propios sentimientos. Nunca me has dicho en qué consistían.

—¿De qué sirve que te lo diga? —dijo Gwendolen, interpretándolo como un reproche—. Cuando tenga algo agradable que decir, puedes estar segura que te lo contaré.

—Pero el señor Grandcourt considerará que ya le has aceptado al permitirle venir. Su nota deja bien claro que va a venir a declararse.

—Muy bien; y yo quiero tener el placer de rechazarle.

La señora Davilow levantó la vista sorprendida, pero Gwendolen dejó entrever que no quería que se le cuestionase su deseo al decir:

—Deja ya ese trabajo detestable de costura, y vayamos a dar un paseo por la avenida. Estoy sofocada.

Capítulo 27

> El Deseo ha orientado las velas, y las Circunstancias
> solo traen la brisa que las empuja.

Mientras Grandcourt tomaba el agradable paseo a caballo que separaba Diplow de Offendene, montado en su precioso Yarico oscuro, y su mozo iba detrás montado sobre Criterion, Gwendolen estaba sentada enfrente del espejo mientras su madre recogía la abundante cabellera ligeramente castaña que había estado peinando cuidadosamente.

—Recógela de forma simple y hazle una coleta, mamá —dijo Gwendolen.

—Deja que vaya a por unos pendientes, Gwen —dijo la señora Davilow, cuando terminó de ajustarle el pelo, y ambas miraban el reflejo del espejo. Era imposible que no se dieran cuenta que los ojos de Gwendolen brillaban como no lo habían hecho recientemente, y que parecía que se hubiera desvanecido una sombra de su rostro, devolviendo a cada uno de sus rasgos su plácida juventud. La madre sacó ciertas conclusiones que alegraron su voz:

—¿Te pongo los pendientes?

—No, mamá; no voy a llevar ningún adorno, y me pondré mi vestido de seda negra. El negro es la única opción cuando hay que rechazar una declaración —dijo Gwendolen, dirigiendo a su madre una de sus antiguas sonrisas mientras se levantaba para quitarse el camisón.

—Imagínate que al final no se produce la declaración —dijo la señora Davilow, no sin intención maliciosa.

—Entonces será porque le he rechazado antes —dijo Gwendolen—. Viene a ser lo mismo.

Ladeó ligera y orgullosamente la cabeza mientras dijo esto; y mientras bajaba las escaleras vestida con sus largas ropas negras, recuperó esa firmeza en su porte y elasticidad en sus movimientos que recientemente había perdido, como una planta marchita. Su madre pensó: «Vuelve a ser ella de nuevo. Debe estar encantada con su regreso. ¿Puede haber decidido realmente rechazarle?».

Gwendolen se habría enfadado si ese pensamiento se hubiese exteriorizado; tal vez sobre todo porque durante las últimas veinte horas, salvo una breve interrupción para dormir, se había mantenido tan ocupada

alternando imágenes y argumentos a favor y en contra de la posibilidad de casarse con Grandcourt, que la conclusión que había determinado de antemano ya no le servía: el ir alternando pensamientos en uno y otro sentido engendrados por deseos contrapuestos la había llevado a un estado en el que no podía fijar ninguna conclusión. Habría expresado su determinación como antes; pero se sentía como si le hubieran succionado la sangre, temblando como el que dice aceptar la voluntad de Dios, pero espera ansioso una oportunidad. No era su intención aceptar a Grandcourt; desde el primer momento en que recibió su carta, había pretendido rechazarle; sin embargo, eso no le impedía, sino que aún le animaba, a afrontar las desagradables razones que le llevaron a tomar su decisión, y no podía evitar que su imaginación llenara los huecos de su conocimiento de varias formas, algunas de las cuales parecían cambiar el aspecto de lo que sabía. A fuerza de mirar a un objeto indefinido con una imaginación constructiva, uno puede darle veinte formas distintas. Sus confusos motivos de indecisión antes de la entrevista en las Piedras Susurrantes, no contaban ya nada; se desvanecieron todos en su repulsión definitiva. Si no hubiera sido por ese día en Cardell Chase, se dijo ahora, no habría habido ningún obstáculo para casarse con Grandcourt. Ese día y los sucesivos, no había razonado: había actuado con una fuerza impulsiva contra la cual cualquier signo de replantearse la situación no era más que una pequeña voz contra un torrente. El impulso le había llegado, no solo por su orgullo célibe y sus celos, no solo por el impacto de observar la desgracia de otra mujer, sino por su temor a equivocarse, que, era impreciso, es cierto, y distante de los detalles diarios de su vida, pero no por ello menos fuerte. No tenía escrúpulos sobre todo lo que se aceptaba como coherente con el hecho de ser una dama; pero cuando entraba en el terreno pantanoso de lo vergonzoso, entuerto, o culpable, se estremecía con una mezcla de orgullo y terror; e incluso, además de la vergüenza, se habría llegado a sentir culpable por cualquier injuria deliberada a otra persona.

Pero ahora, ¿sabía exactamente cuál era el estado de la situación respecto a la señora Glasher y sus hijos? Había hecho una especie de promesa, había dicho: «No interferiré con tus deseos». ¿Pero sería, de hecho, otra mujer que se había casado con Grandcourt, el obstáculo decisivo a sus deseos? ¿Iba a hacerle realmente daño a ella y a su hijo? ¿No daría igual, o de hecho sería incluso mejor, que Grandcourt se casara? ¿Pues qué no podría hacer una mujer al estar casada, si sabía cómo imponerse? Hasta aquí todo era imaginación constructiva. Gwendolen tenía una concepción tan precisa del

matrimonio, es decir, de las influencias mutuas, de los requerimientos y los deberes del hombre y la mujer en el estado del matrimonio, como la que tenía sobre las corrientes magnéticas o la ley de las tormentas.

—Mamá se manejó mal —era su forma de resumir lo que había visto de la experiencia de su madre: ella se las arreglaría de forma diferente. Las tribulaciones del matrimonio era el último de los temas que la señora Davilow podía conseguir entrar a fondo con su hija.

«¡Me pregunto qué dirían mamá y mi tío si supieran de la señora Glasher!», pensó Gwendolen, en su debate interno; no es que se imaginara contándoselo, incluso aunque no se hubiera sentido inclinada a permanecer en silencio. «¡Me pregunto qué diría cualquier persona!; ¡o qué es lo que dirían sobre el hecho de que el señor Grandcourt se casara con otra y tuviera otros hijos!». Considerar lo que diría «cualquier persona» significaba descargarse de la dificultad que entrañaba juzgar lo que le resultaba oscuro cuando el sentimiento había dejado de ser decisivo. Solo tenía que reunir sus recuerdos, que le mostraban que «cualquier persona» consideraba normal que los niños ilegítimos tuviesen menos derechos y ventajas sociales que los padres ilegítimos. El veredicto de «cualquier persona» parecía ser que ella no tenía que preocuparse demasiado por la señora Glasher y sus hijos.

Pero había otra manera en la que la habían preocupado. Lo que los demás pensasen no podía apartar el sentimiento que en primera instancia apenas era tan fuerte como para ser descrito como indignación u odio por haber estado a punto de unirse a una vida gastada, llena de secretos pasados que todavía podían ser peores que la asociación con *ella*. Ciertamente, la cuestión del amor con respecto a Grandcourt no se le había casi ni pasado por la cabeza. Siempre había considerado deseable el matrimonio por otros sentimientos distintos al amor; y estar enamorado le correspondía al hombre, y los avances en ese sentido dependían de él. Gwendolen no había encontrado objeción alguna a la forma de estar enamorado de Grandcourt antes de esa pequeña revelación de su pasado, de la que se resentía como si hubiera sido una ofensa deliberada contra ella. La forma en que la cortejó fue deliberada, y sentía una aversión retrospectiva hacia ella. Tal vez la vida de otros hombres fuera similar, llena de secretos que convertían las suposiciones ignorantes de la mujer con la que querían casarse en una farsa de la que se reían por detrás.

Estos sentimientos de aversión e indignación habían calado hondo; y aunque las problemáticas experiencias de las últimas semanas los habían mitigado dejándolos en simples recuerdos, fue principalmente a causa de ellos

que se mantuvo firme en su decisión de no aceptar a Grandcourt. En ningún momento había pretendido cambiar de opinión; solo había estado considerando qué es lo que debía pensar y decir. Si algo la hubiera inducido a cambiar, habría sido la perspectiva de hacerlo todo más llevadero para su «pobre mamá»; eso, lo admitía, era una tentación. ¡Pero no! Iba a rechazarlo. Mientras, el pensamiento de que él iba a venir para ser rechazado era de lo más animador: ella volvía a tener de nuevo las riendas; por su interior circulaba una nueva corriente, que la hizo recuperarse del estado abatido que la había dejado su conversación con Klesmer. No iba ya a desvivirse por generar una buena opinión de sus capacidades; iba a ejercer su poder.

¿Era esto lo que hizo palpitar su corazón con una sensación de incomodidad cuando oyó las pisadas de los caballos en la grava? ¿O cuando la señorita Merry, que abrió la puerta a Grandcourt, vino a decirle que estaba ya en la sala? Aparentemente las horas de preparación y el triunfo de la situación no servían de nada: era como si le viera llegar inesperadamente en medio de su desaliento. Mientras entraban en la sala de estar, tuvo que concentrar toda su energía en su autocontrol, dando la impresión de extremada cortesía mientras le estrechaba la mano, cosa que aumentó las esperanzas de él, que veía que le sentaba muy bien esa voz tan baja y lánguida como la suya. Un momento después, cuando estuvieron ambos sentados en dos de las sillas estampadas con coronas de flores —Gwendolen erguida y con los párpados abatidos, Grandcourt a unas dos yardas[122] de distancia, apoyando un brazo en el respaldo de su asiento y observándola a la vez que sostenía todavía su sombrero en su mano izquierda—, cualquiera que los hubiera visto habría pensado que estaban en el momento crucial de una declaración amorosa. Y efectivamente la declaración había empezado: ella ya se sentía cortejada por este hombre silencioso sentado a una distancia cómoda de ella, en un ambiente sutil cargado de rosas y con toda la atención volcada sobre ella. Y también él pensaba que estaba cortejándola: no era un hombre que no sabía que su presencia no acarreaba consecuencias; y era exactamente el hombre que podía comprender mejor la chispa de una chica que consideraba impredecible.

—Me decepcionó no encontrarla en Leubronn —comenzó; esta vez su habitual pronunciación lenta tenía una nota de languidez amorosa—. El lugar era intolerable sin usted. Una auténtica perrera. ¿No cree usted lo mismo?

—No puedo juzgar lo que sería sin mí —dijo Gwendolen, elevando la vista hacia él, recobrando algo de su malicia—. *Conmigo* me gustó tanto

como para permanecer por más tiempo si hubiera podido. Pero tuve que regresar a casa a causa de ciertos problemas familiares.

—Fue muy cruel por su parte que se marchara a Leubronn —dijo Grandcourt, haciendo caso omiso de los problemas, sobre los cuales Gwendolen, sin saber muy bien por qué, deseaba dejarlos claros inmediatamente—. Debía saber que iba a estropearlo todo: usted sabía que era el corazón y el alma de todo lo que aconteciera. ¿Se comporta usted de forma temeraria por mi culpa?

Era imposible decir «sí» en un tono que fuera tomado en serio; igualmente imposible decir «no»; ¿pero qué otra cosa podía decir? Vista la dificultad, bajó de nuevo sus párpados, mientras su rostro y el cuello enrojecían. Grandcourt lo interpretó como una muestra de su aprobación. Pero estaba decidido a que lo mostrase más claramente.

—¿Tal vez hay un interés más profundo, algún encanto, algún compromiso, del que habría sido justo hacerme partícipe? ¿Hay algún hombre que se interponga ente nosotros?

En su interior la respuesta se fraguó inmediatamente: «No, pero hay una mujer». ¿Pero cómo iba a exteriorizarla? Incluso si no hubiera prometido a la mujer permanecer en silencio, le habría resultado imposible sacar el tema con Grandcourt. ¿Y cómo iba a cortar la declaración con un discurso formal: «percibo su intención, es de lo más halagador, etc.»? A un pez al que se le invita honestamente a venir y ser comido puede mostrar su rechazo claramente, ¿pero cómo lo hace si se ve atrapado en una red? Y además de la red, ¿se habría atrevido a decir algo decisivo de inmediato? Gwendolen no tenía tiempo de aclararse en ese punto. Así que se vio obligada a guardar silencio, y tras una pausa, Grandcourt dijo:

—¿Debo entender que prefiere a otro?

Gwendolen, impaciente ahora por su propia incomodidad, decidió afrontar la situación y librarse de ella. Alzó de nuevo los ojos y dijo con algo de su anterior claridad y desafío: «No», deseando que él entendiera: «¿Y qué? Puedo no estar dispuesta a aceptarle a usted». No había nada que Grandcourt no pudiera entender que viera que afectara a su amor propio.

—Lo último que haría sería importunarla. No querría conseguir su consentimiento por pesado. Si no hubiera ninguna esperanza para mí, le pediría que me lo dijera inmediatamente, que puedo marcharme… no importa dónde.

Casi para su sorpresa, Gwendolen sintió un sobresalto repentino al imaginarse a Grandcourt finalmente marchándose. ¿Qué le quedaría a ella entonces? Nada más que la anterior monotonía. Le gustaba que él estuviese allí. Se agarró al tema que podía retrasar cualquier respuesta definitiva.

—Me temo que usted no es consciente de lo que nos ha pasado a nosotras. Recientemente he tenido que pensar tanto en los problemas de mi mamá, que los demás temas han quedado un poco en segundo plano. Ha perdido toda su fortuna y vamos a abandonar este lugar. Le ruego disculpe que parezca preocupada.

Al eludir la cuestión directa, Gwendolen recobró algo de su entereza. Habló con dignidad y miró fijamente a Grandcourt, cuyos ojos largos, estrechos e impenetrables se toparon con los suyos, y misteriosamente quedaron atrapados: misteriosamente, pues el drama variado y sutil entre el hombre y la mujer es de tal naturaleza que raras veces puede ser expresado con palabras puestas juntas como fichas de dominó, según reglas obvias y fijas. La palabra que lo mueve todo, el Amor, no expresa mejor los millones de formas de atracción mutua que la palabra Pensamiento puede informarnos de lo que pasa por la mente de nuestro vecino. Sería difícil decir de qué parte, si de la de Gwendolen o de la de Grandcourt, la influencia era más confusa. En ese momento, el mayor deseo de él era dominar por competo a esta criatura, esta hiriente combinación de ingenuidad y malicia: que ella supiera cosas que la habían apartado de él, le espoleó a vencer sobre tal repugnancia; y estaba empezando a creer que vencería. Y ella —¡ah, también se veía tristemente en la necesidad de dominar!—, ella se sentía superada como el sediento que es conducido hasta lo que parece agua en el desierto, superada por la sensación envolvente de saber que en el homenaje de este hombre residía la salvación respecto a la situación desvalida que la oprimía.

Mientras, se miraban el uno al otro; y Grandcourt dijo lenta y lánguidamente, como si no tuviera importancia, al haberse fijado las otras cosas:

—Usted me dirá ahora, espero, que el revés de fortuna de la señora Davilow ya no le preocupará. Confiará en mí para descargar ese peso que la oprime. Me dará el derecho a apartarlas de eso.

Las pequeñas pausas y el modo refinado con el que ese lento discurso fue pronunciado dieron tiempo a Gwendolen para imaginarse el sueño de una vida. A medida que las palabras iban calando en ella, tenían el efecto embriagador del vino, que de repente lo convierte todo en algo más fácil, hace

que las cosas deseables no parezcan tan malas, y que la gente en general sea menos desagradable. Tuvo un momentáneo amor fantasmal por este hombre que escogía tan bien sus palabras, y que era una mera encarnación del homenaje refinado. Repugnancia, temor, escrúpulos, quedaban oscurecidos como penas recordadas, mientras saboreaba ya el alivio de abandonar inmediatamente la desesperanza. Se imaginó saltando de alegría ante su madre, y recobrando de nuevo su ánimo. Con todo, cuando Grandcourt dejó de hablar, hubo un instante en el que fue consciente de que los acontecimientos podían dar un giro.

—Es usted muy generoso —dijo, sin mover los ojos, y hablando en un tono amable.

—¿Acepta usted lo que harán que estas cosas se den por supuestas? —dijo Grandcourt, sin ninguna ilusión añadida—. ¿Consiente usted en ser mi mujer?

Esta vez Gwendolen palideció. Algo la hizo levantarse de su asiento a pesar de sí misma, y se apartó cierta distancia. Entonces se giró, y con las manos entrelazadas ante ella permaneció en silencio.

Grandcourt inmediatamente se levantó también, dejando su sombrero en la silla, pero sujetándolo con la mano todavía. La duda evidente de esta chica desvalida de aceptar su espléndida oferta estimuló su interés como no le había sucedido en años. Sobre todo porque atribuía por completo su duda a sus conocimientos sobre la señora Glasher. Con esa actitud de preparación, dijo:

—¿Me ordena marcharme? —Ningún espíritu familiar podía haberle sugerido palabras más efectivas.

—No —dijo Gwendolen. No podía dejarle ir: esa negativa era un modo de retenerle. Se dio cuenta que, después de todo, iba a la deriva sin remedio hacia la tremenda decisión: pero ir a la deriva depende de algo más que las corrientes, cuando las velas se han desplegado antes.

—¿Acepta mi devoción? —dijo Grandcourt, sujetando el sombrero en un lado y mirándola fijamente a los ojos, sin movimiento alguno. Ese cruce de miradas podía albergar una pausa inmensamente larga; pero por mucho que esperara, ¿cómo podría contradecir su sentimiento? ¿Para qué le había retenido? Él había excluido cualquier explicación.

—Sí —salió de los labios de Gwendolen tan solemnemente como si hubiera contestado a su nombre en un tribunal de justicia. Él lo recibió seriamente, y continuaron mirándose en la misma actitud. ¿Hubo alguna vez en el mundo esa manera de aceptar el encantador «sí»? Grandcourt prefería

estar a esa distancia, se sentía como ante una ceremonia en la que se imponía una prohibición indefinida que emanaba de la postura de Gwendolen.

Pero al fin dejó su sombrero y dio unos pasos para coger su mano, solo para estrecharla contra sus labios y dejarla libre de nuevo. Ella pensó que su actitud era perfecta, y recuperó una sensación de libertad que la preparó para recobrar su picaresca. Su «sí» implicaba tan poco en ese momento, que nada impedía ocultar el cambio que habían dado sus tristes perspectivas: solo podía pensar en verse libre de los Mompert, y en que su madre se viera libre de la Cabaña de Sawyer. Con una alegre curvatura en sus labios, dijo:

—¿No vamos a ver a mamá? Iré a por ella.

—Esperemos un poco —dijo Grandcourt, en su actitud preferida, con sus dedos índice y pulgar de la mano izquierda dentro del bolsillo de su chaleco, y acariciándose el bigote con los de la mano derecha, mientras permanecía cerca de Gwendolen mirándola, no muy diferente de como la miraría un caballero que tuviera una intervención acertada en una fiesta nocturna.

—¿Tiene algo más que decirme? —dijo Gwendolen, juguetona.

—Sí, ya sé que le aburre que le digan cosas —dijo Grandcourt con comprensión.

—No cuando hay cosas que me gusta oír.

—¿Le molestará que le pregunte cuándo podemos casarnos?

—Creo que hoy sí —dijo Gwendolen, alzando su barbilla con coquetería.

—Hoy no, entonces. Pero sí mañana. Piénselo antes de que venga mañana. En quince días, o tres semanas, tan pronto como sea posible.

—Ah, cree que se cansará de mi compañía —dijo Gwendolen—. Me he dado cuenta de que cuando la gente se casa, el marido no pasa tanto tiempo con su mujer como cuando estaban comprometidos. Pero tal vez yo también prefiera eso.

Soltó una risa encantadora.

—Tendrá lo que le guste —dijo Grandcourt.

—¿Y nada de lo que no me guste? Por favor, dígalo; porque creo que me disgusta lo que no me gusta más que me gusta lo que me gusta —dijo Gwendolen, encantada de hallarse en el paraíso de la mujer, donde todas sus tonterías son adorables.

Grandcourt hizo una pausa: tenía mucha experiencia en este tipo de sutilidades.

—No sé, es este un mundo tan bruto, las cosas a menudo se tuercen como uno no desea. Yo no puedo evitar que esté siempre aburrida. Si quiere ir a por

Criterion, no puedo impedir que venga.

—Ah, mi amigo Criterion, ¿cómo está?

—Está afuera: el mozo vino con él para que lo viera. Ayer le pusimos la silla de equitación una o dos horas. Acérquese a la ventana a mirarlo.

Vieron cómo los dos caballos eran conducidos lentamente por la curva, y las hermosas criaturas, bien cepilladas, enviaron un relincho de exultación a Gwendolen. Eran los símbolos del poder y el lujo, en delicioso contraste con la horrorosa pobreza y humillación a las que había tenido que hacer frente recientemente.

—¿Montará a Criterion mañana? —dijo Grandcourt—. Si quiere, lo prepararemos todo para ello.

—Es lo que más me gustaría —dijo Gwendolen—. Quiero perderme galopando de nuevo. Pero ahora debo irme y buscar a mamá.

—Agárrese a mi brazo hasta la puerta, entonces —dijo Grandcourt, y ella aceptó. Sus rostros estaban muy cerca el uno del otro, casi al mismo nivel, y él la miraba. Ella pensó que su actitud como amante era más agradable de lo que nunca le habían descrito. No temía que le fuera a besar, y estaba tan encantada, que de repente se paró en medio de la habitación y dijo, medio en broma medio en serio:

—Oh, ahora que pienso, hay algo que no me gusta de lo que me puede librar. No me gusta la compañía del señor Lush.

—No la tendrá. Me desembarazaré de él.

—¿No le cae bien tampoco?

—Lo más mínimo. He dejado que me sirva porque siempre ha sido un pobre diablo —dijo Grandcourt, exteriorizando en *adagio* su indiferencia—. Me lo colocaron para viajar conmigo cuando era un muchacho. Era siempre ese bruto de cabello grueso enrizado, una especie de cruce entre un cerdo y un aficionado.

Gwendolen soltó una carcajada. Todo parecía muy bueno y natural. La meticulosidad de Grandcourt realzaba la bondad. Y cuando alcanzaron la puerta, su forma de abrírsela era la perfección de la galantería. En realidad, pensó, probablemente iba a ser el menos desagradable de los maridos.

La señora Davilow estaba esperando ansiosamente en su dormitorio cuando Gwendolen entró, avanzó rápidamente hacia ella, y besándola en ambas mejillas le susurró:

—Ven abajo, mamá, a ver al señor Grandcourt. Estoy comprometida con él.

—¡Mi querida chica! —dijo la señora Davilow, con una sorpresa más solemne que alegre.

—Sí —dijo Gwendolen, en el mismo tono, y con una rapidez que llevaba implícita la inutilidad de hacer preguntas—. Todo ha quedado establecido. No vas a irte a la Cabaña Sawyer, la señora Mompert no va a vigilarme, y todo se va arreglar tal como quiero. Así que baja conmigo inmediatamente.

LIBRO IV

Gwendolen aprovecha su oportunidad

Capítulo 28

> Es más fácil conocer al hombre en general que conocer a un hombre en particular.
>
> La Rochefoucauld

Una hora después de que Grandcourt se hubiera ido, las importantes noticias del compromiso de Gwendolen se sabían en la Rectoría, y el señor y la señora Gascoigne, junto con Anna, pasaron la noche en Offendene.

—Querida, permíteme felicitarte por haber establecido un lazo fuerte —dijo el Rector—. Pareces seria, y no me sorprende: una unión para toda la vida es algo solemne. Pero de la forma en que ha hablado y actuado el señor Grandcourt creo que ya podemos entrever una buena salida a nuestra adversidad. Esto te ha permitido observar la liberalidad delicada de tu futuro marido.

El señor Gascoigne se refería a la forma en que Grandcourt había sugerido que proveería a la señora Gascoigne, una parte de la declaración que Gwendolen se había acordado de citar a su madre al pie de la letra.

—Pero no me cabe duda de que el señor Grandcourt se habría portado tan perfectamente si no te hubieras ido a Alemania, Gwendolen, y hubieras estado comprometida con él, como sin duda podías haberlo estado, hace más de un mes —dijo el señor Gascoigne, creyendo que ella tenía que cumplir con un deber sobre este tema—. Pero ahora ya no hay lugar para el capricho; ciertamente, confío en que no te tentará ninguno más. Una mujer tiene una gran deuda de gratitud hacia un hombre que persevera de esta forma en su propuesta matrimonial. Pero sin duda te sientes encantada.

—No estoy tan segura de que me sienta así, tío —dijo Gwendolen, con una seriedad insolente—. No creo que haya que sentirse encantada por estar comprometida.

El Rector le dio unas palmaditas en el hombro y sonrió como si solo se tratase de travesuras inocentes, y su mujer tomó la actitud de su marido como una indicación de que no había que desagradar a Gwendolen. En cuanto a Anna, le dio un beso y dijo:

—Espero de verdad que seas feliz —pero luego se retiró un poco e intentó reprimir las lágrimas. En los últimos días había imaginado un pequeño

romance en torno a Rex, y cómo se suavizaba el corazón de Gwendolen al ver que todavía él suspiraba por ella, y que acaban casándose. Y había llegado a rezar por ese romance, para que ella, Anna, pudiera colaborar alegremente como una buena hermana y solo pensaba en cómo ser útil para ayudar a Gwendolen, pues su hermano no era rico. Pero ahora tendría que colaborar de otra manera. La señorita Merry y las cuatro chicas, Alice con sus hombros elevados, Bertha y Fanny las que cuchicheaban, e Isabel la que escuchaba, se hallaban todas presentes en esta reunión familiar, en la que todo parecía girar adecuadamente para el honor y gloria de Gwendolen, y en la que la vida real era tan interesante como el «Sir Charles Grandison»[123]. La velada pasó principalmente entre observaciones decisivas del Rector, respondiendo a las conjeturas de las dos señoras mayores. Según él, el caso era de una envergadura tal que no creía que fuese su deber establecer las condiciones: indudablemente había que dejarlo todo en las seguras manos del señor Grandcourt.

—Me gustaría saber exactamente qué clase de lugares son Ryelands y Gadsmere —dijo la señora Davilow.

—Gadsmere, creo, es un lugar de poca relevancia —dijo el señor Gascoigne—; pero sé que Ryelands es uno de los asientos más refinados. El parque es extenso y los bosques tienen buenos árboles. La casa la construyó Inigo Jones, y el techo está pintado al estilo italiano. Se dice que la finca vale bien doce mil libras al año, y hay dos viviendas, una de las cuales es una rectoría, concesión de los Grandcourt. Puede que las tierras tengan algunas cargas. Pero aún así, el señor Grandcourt es hijo único.

—Sería de lo más admirable —dijo la señora Gascoigne—, si llegara a convertirse en Lord Stannery aparte de todo lo demás. Date cuenta: está la finca Grandcourt, la finca Mallinger, y el título de baronet, y el de par —iba contando cada cosa con los dedos, y se paró en el cuarto para luego añadir—: aunque se dice que no obtendrá tierras con el título de par. —Parecía una pena que no hubiera nada para el quinto dedo.

—El título de par —dijo el Rector juiciosamente—, debe mirarse como una posibilidad remota. Hay dos primos entre el par actual y el señor Grandcourt. Es cierto que da que pensar cómo la muerte y otras causas concentran las herencias en un solo hombre. Pero es mejor despreciar un exceso de esa magnitud. Ser Sir Mallinger Grandcourt Mallinger, supongo que ese será su estilo, con las correspondientes propiedades, es un talento

valioso para cualquier hombre que se comprometa con ello. Esperemos que sepa usarlo.

—¡Y qué posición para la mujer, Gwendolen! —dijo la señora Gascoigne —; una gran responsabilidad, en verdad. Pero no debes perder ni un momento en escribir a la señora Mompert, Henry. Sería bueno que ofrecieras como excusa un compromiso de matrimonio, pues de otra forma se sentiría ofendida. Es una mujer de la alta sociedad.

—Me he librado de ese horror —pensó Gwendolen para quien el nombre de Mompert se había convertido en una especie de tabú. Estuvo muy callada durante toda la velada, y esa noche apenas pudo dormir en su pequeña cama blanca. Era algo raro que en lo más vigoroso de su juventud tuviera problemas de insomnio; y tal vez lo era aún más para ella el preocuparse de que su madre no supiera de su inquietud. Pero su estado de ánimo era nuevo por completo: ella, que estaba acostumbrada a sentirse segura de sí misma, y dispuesta a disponer de los demás, acababa de dar un paso que de antemano se había propuesto no dar, o mejor, que estaba obligada a no dar. Ya no podía dar marcha atrás; le entusiasmaba el panorama que se extendía ante ella; y no había nada que mereciera la pena de lo que dejaba atrás. Pero le perseguía la sombra de su resolución previa que tan claramente había sentido al principio. Mientras descansaba con la cabeza tumbada sobre su almohada con los ojos bien abiertos, «contemplando esa oscuridad que ven los ciegos»[124], le consternó la idea de que iba a hacer lo que una vez rechazó con repugnancia. Era nuevo para ella que la cuestión de obrar bien o mal le produjera terror; no había sentido nunca escrúpulos por su conducta. Pero en este asunto se había despertado algo así como una nueva conciencia. Parecía a punto de adoptar deliberadamente, como un principio para el resto de su vida, lo que de forma precipitada había manifestado en su amargura, cuando su descubrimiento la había llevado a Leubronn: que no importaba lo que ella hiciera; solo tenía que divertirse todo lo que pudiera. Ese modo de vivir sin regla alguna, apartando sin cuidado cualquier razonamiento, de repente la asustó: le vinieron a su mente las posibles consecuencias funestas que eso podía acarrear, más aún cuando la desgracia ya no era un simple nombre para ella, y todas las influencias infiltradas de las desoídas enseñanzas religiosas así como la impresión profunda de que algo espantoso e inexorable la estaba envolviendo parecían concentrarse en la idea indefinida de un poder vengador. La posición brillante que tanto había anhelado, la imaginada libertad que se construiría en el matrimonio, la salvación de la aburrida insignificancia de su infancia, todo

se presentó inmediatamente ante ella; y a pesar del hambre que sentía de todo ello, vino como la comida que aparece con una sensación de sacrilegio, y que le producía terror. En la oscuridad y soledad de su pequeña cama, su parte íntima más resistente no pudo evitar la primera embestida del miedo tras su irrevocable decisión. Esa mujer de cara triste y sus hijos —Grandcourt y su relación con ella— se repetían una y otra vez en su imaginación como el aferrado recuerdo de la deshonra, y fue extinguiendo gradualmente cualquier otro pensamiento, dejando solo la consciencia de haber introducido esas escenas en su vida. Su larga vigilia parecía un delirio; una débil luz, realmente débil, penetró a través de la cortina de la ventana; le cogieron escalofríos. Ya no podía soportarlo más, y gritó:

—¡Mamá!

—Sí, querida —dijo la señora Davilow inmediatamente, con voz desvelada.

—Déjame estar contigo.

Enseguida se trasladó a dormir al hombro de su madre, y durmió hasta tarde, cuando, soñando con una sala de baile encendida, abrió los ojos y se encontró con su madre al lado de la cama con un pequeño paquete en su mano.

—Me sabe mal despertarte, querida, pero pensé que sería mejor entregarte esto inmediatamente. El mozo ha traído a Criterion; él ha venido en otro caballo, y dice que se va a quedar aquí.

Gwendolen se sentó en la cama y abrió el paquete. Era una cajita esmaltada, en cuyo interior había un espléndido anillo de diamantes con un sobre que contenía un trozo de papel de color doblado y estas palabras:

> Le ruego lleve este anillo cuando venga a las doce en señal de nuestro compromiso. Adjunto un cheque emitido a nombre del señor Gascoigne, para los gastos inmediatos. Por supuesto, la señora Davilow se quedará en Offendene, al menos durante un tiempo. Espero que, cuando venga, me hará el honor de señalarme un día cercano, y empezar a tratarme con más familiaridad. Suyo, devotamente,
>
> H. M. GRANDCOURT.

El cheque era de quinientas libras, y Gwendolen se lo enseñó a su madre, con la carta.

—¡Qué amable y qué delicado! —dijo la señora Davilow, sentidamente—. Pero preferiría no depender de un yerno. Yo y las chicas podemos apañarnos bien.

—Mamá, si vuelves a decir eso, no me caso con él —dijo Gwendolen, enfadada.

—Mi querida hija, confió en que no te vas a casar solo por mi futuro —dijo la señora Davilow, en un tono despectivo.

Gwendolen se dejó caer sobre su almohada, lejos de su madre, y dejó el anillo al lado. Estaba irritada por este intento de descartar un motivo. Tal vez la causa más profunda de su irritación era la conciencia de que no se iba a casar solamente por el futuro de su madre, de que estaba siendo arrastrada hacia el matrimonio de una forma en contra de la cual las razones que eran más poderosas aún que la renuncia de su madre no eran, sin embargo, tan poderosas como para poner dificultades. Se había abierto a los signos con los que se había comprometido irrevocablemente, y todas las visiones horribles, las alarmas, los argumentos de la noche, debían ser analizados bajo la luz del día, y serían probablemente debilitados.

—Lo que yo anhelo es tu felicidad, querida —continuó la señora Davilow, suplicante—. No quiero decir nada que te moleste. ¿No te vas a poner el anillo?

Durante unos momentos, Gwendolen no respondió, pero sus pensamientos seguían activos. Al final se levantó con la determinación propia de cuando montaba a caballo, y decidió continuar con ánimo, corriesen las ideas que corriesen por su cabeza.

—Pensaba que era siempre el amante el que ponía el anillo de compromiso —dijo, riendo, deslizando el anillo en su dedo, y mirándolo con un movimiento gracioso de su cabeza—. Sé por qué lo ha enviado —añadió, asintiendo a su madre.

—¿Por qué?

—Antes preferiría que me lo pusiera yo misma que pedirme permiso para dejarle hacerlo a él. ¡Ajá! Es muy orgulloso. Pero yo también lo soy. Hacemos buena pareja. Odiaría a un hombre que se pusiera de rodillas y me siguiera coleando. Realmente no es desagradable.

—Eso es un halago muy moderado, Gwen.

—No, no lo es, para un hombre —dijo Gwendolen alegremente—. Pero ahora debo levantarme y vestirme. ¿Vienes a arreglarme el pelo, mamá, querida? —continuó, bajando la cara de su mamá para acariciarla con sus propias mejillas—, ¿y no ser más tan fastidiosa como para hablar de vivir en la pobreza? Tendrás que soportar vivir cómodamente, aunque no te guste. Y el señor Grandcourt se ha comportado perfectamente, ¿verdad?

—Ciertamente —dijo la señora Davilow, animada, y persuadida de que después de todo Gwendolen quería a su prometido. Ella misma lo consideraba un hombre cuyas atenciones tenían que afectar a los sentimientos de una chica. Hay que juzgar a menudo a los pretendientes como a las palabras, por su calidad y la impresión que producen en la buena sociedad: es difícil saber mucho más de ellos. Y toda la ansiedad de la madre se volvió, no hacia la persona de Grandcourt, sino hacia el estado de ánimo de Gwendolen para aceptarle.

Su estado de ánimo estaba necesariamente pasando por una nueva fase esta mañana. Ya a la hora de asearse había repasado todos los motivos que tenía para justificar su matrimonio. Y en lo que más se detenía era en la determinación de que, cuando fuera la mujer de Grandcourt, le obligaría a comportarse de la forma más liberal posible hacia los hijos de la señora Glasher.

—¿De qué le serviría a ella que no me casara con él? Podía haberse casado con ella si hubiera querido; pero *no* quiso. Quizás es ella la que tenga la culpa. Tiene que haber muchas cosas de las que no sepa nada de ella. Y él se tiene que haber portado bien con ella en muchos sentidos, sino no querría casarse con él.

Pero enseguida el último argumento comenzó a parecer dudoso. La señora Glasher querría naturalmente excluir a otros hijos que se interpusieran entre Grandcourt y los suyos; y la comprensión de Gwendolen de este sentimiento le hizo buscar otros motivos para justificarse.

«Quizás no tengamos hijos. Espero que no. Y él podría dejar la hacienda al hermoso niño. Mi tío dijo que el señor Grandcourt podía hacer lo que quisiera con las haciendas. Cuando Sir Hugo Mallinger muera habrá suficiente para dos».

Esto hizo que la señora Glasher no apareciera muy razonable al pedir que su hijo fuera el único heredero; la doble propiedad era un seguro de que el matrimonio de Grandcourt no le haría daño a ella, más cuando la mujer era Gwendolen Harleth, con toda su orgullosa determinación de no ser nunca acusada por algo que fuera cierto. Esta chica se había acostumbrado a verse siempre inocente: solo los demás eran culpables.

Era llamativo que, una vez que se hubo convencido con este argumento de que no perjudicaba a la señora Glasher, su repugnancia respecto al pasado de Grandcourt hubiera quedado relegado a un segundo plano. El terror que había sentido por la noche de dar un paso más allá de lo permitido al hacer lo que al

principio había pensado que estaba mal, había empañado cualquier emoción sobre su conducta. Ella pensaba de él, fuera lo que fuese, como un hombre gracias al cual iba a tener un poder infinito; y como a ella nunca le había importado si le amaba a él o no, todo lo agradable que tenía ya era mucho. La pobre Gwendolen no sentía respeto por las fuerzas inmanejables que agitan el estado del matrimonio, sino que lo consideraba como una cuestión de saberlo administrar, y que ella sabría cómo hacerlo. Respecto al pasado de Grandcourt quiso convencerse con nuevas dudas sobre si difería mucho del de otros hombres; y no vio que pudiera comprender que es lo que se esperaba de los hombres en general.

Pero lo que sí era cierto es que su cabello estaba perfectamente arreglado para cabalgar, y bajó ya vestida para montar su caballo y no retrasar su paseo. Quería que la embriaguez de la juventud agitase de nuevo la sangre de sus venas, y recobrar la confianza que había tenido en su futuro. Al menos se había librado de una carga, pues a la luz del día y con la actividad se veía menos agobiada por las dudas sobre su elección; al menos, era mejor que sentir no tener más oportunidad que soportar la insignificancia y la servidumbre.

—Regresa a tu habitación y arréglate como una duquesa, mamá —dijo, volviéndose, de repente, mientras bajaba las escaleras—. Ponte la puntilla en la cabeza. Quiero que parezcas una duquesa. No debes aceptar las cosas humildemente.

Cuando Grandcourt alzó su mano izquierda cortésmente y miró el anillo, ella le dijo seriamente:

—Fue muy bueno al pensar en todo y enviarme ese paquete.

—¿Me dirá si hay algo que olvidé? —dijo él, cogiéndole suavemente la mano—. Haré todo lo que desee.

—Pero yo tengo deseos muy irracionales —dijo Gwendolen sonriendo.

—Sí, eso ya lo tengo en cuenta. Las mujeres siempre los tienen.

—Entonces no seré irracional —dijo Gwendolen, retirando la mano, sacudiendo la cabeza con insolencia—. No se dirá de mí que soy como las demás mujeres.

—Yo no he dicho eso —dijo Grandcourt, mirándola con su gravedad habitual—. Usted es lo que ninguna otra mujer es.

—¿Y qué es eso, si se puede saber? —dijo Gwendolen, apartándose a una distancia con cierto aire de amenaza.

Grandcourt hizo su pausa antes de responder.

—Usted es la mujer que amo.

—¡Oh, qué palabras más bonitas! —dijo Gwendolen, riendo. El sentido de ese amor que una vez debió dar a otra mujer bajo extrañas circunstancias estaba siendo familiar.

—Devuélvame a cambio palabras bonitas. Dígame cuándo vamos a casarnos.

—No aún. No hasta que hayamos dado un galope por las colinas. Tengo tantas ganas de eso que no puedo pensar en nada más. Ojalá hubiera empezado la temporada de caza. El domingo veinte, veintisiete, lunes, martes… —Gwendolen estaba contando con los dedos mostrando su rostro más bello mientras miraba a Grandcourt, y al final dio una palmada y dijo triunfante—: Empezará dentro de diez días.

—Casémonos dentro de diez días, entonces —dijo Grandcourt—, y no nos aburriremos con las caballerizas.

—¿Qué es lo que las mujeres responden siempre a eso? —dijo Gwendolen maliciosamente.

—Están de acuerdo —dijo el amante, bajando la guardia.

—¡Entonces yo no lo estaré! —dijo Gwendolen, quitándose sus guanteletes y volviéndoselos a poner, a la vez que mantenía la mirada fija en él con cierta diversión.

La escena era agradable para ambos. Un amante más tosco habría abandonado sus formas y actitudes galantes, y lo hubiera estropeado todo con sus estúpidos intentos de empezar a dar caricias, algo que destruía por completo el teatro. Grandcourt prefería el teatro; y Gwendolen, que se hallaba a gusto, se fue animando poco a poco mientras actuaba en su papel dominador. Tal vez si Klesmer hubiera visto más de ella en ese modo inconsciente de actuar, en vez de verla cuando ella intentaba actuar de verdad, le habría augurado unas oportunidades más altas.

Una vez acabaron el glorioso galope, no obstante, se hallaba en un estado de regocijo tal, que la predispuso a considerar que era una buena idea adelantar el matrimonio que iba a unir su vida con esa espléndida especie de gozo. No iba a discutir más sobre un acto en el que se había comprometido; y consintió en fijar la boda a tres semanas a partir de ese día, a pesar de la dificultad de conseguir cumplir la tradicional ley de completar el ajuar.

Lush, por supuesto, fue plenamente consciente del compromiso gracias a muy variados signos, a pesar de que no se le hubiera dicho nada. Pero esperaba algún tipo de comunicación, y tras unos cuantos días comenzó a

impacientarse por el silencio de Grandcourt, presintiendo que el cambio afectaría sus perspectivas personales, y deseando saber de qué manera. Dejó de emplear como táctica la oposición, que además, por su forma de ser, tampoco le gustaba. Podía causar fácilmente una gran cantidad de problemas a Grandcourt, pero eso repercutiría también en problemas para él, y no iba con él el crear problemas. No obstante, no se arrepentía de haber frustrado un poco a la señorita Gwendolen —después de todo, no sabía lo que iba a suceder al final—. No era nada nuevo que Grandcourt mostrara una obstinación perversa; con todo, su desvarío por esta chica sorprendió a Lush por su novedad como un hombre que estuviera condenado, conducido por una fatalidad espeluznante; y que alguien nacido con su fortuna hiciera un negocio más malo de su vida de lo que era necesario, le parecía más bien digno de compasión. Al haber protestado contra el matrimonio, Lush tuvo una clarividencia especial de sus consecuencias negativas. Grandcourt se había tomado la molestia de escribir cartas y dar él mismo las órdenes en vez de emplear a Lush; y parecía ignorar su utilidad, incluso al elegir, en contra del hábito de muchos años, desayunar solo en su sala de vestir. Pero no podía evitarse un *cara a cara* en una casa desprovista de invitados; y Lush se apresuró a aprovechar la oportunidad de decir, (era un día después de comer, pues había dificultades en que Grandcourt comiera en Offendene):

—¿Y cuándo va a tener lugar la boda?

Grandcourt, que bebía poco vino, había abandonado la mesa y se estaba acomodando en el salón, mientras fumaba, en una butaca cerca de la chimenea, contemplando extasiado cómo ardía de forma intensa un fuego de ramas de roble, a cuyo lado reposaban las cenizas ya consumidas. El sillón brocado de terciopelo rojo oscuro, era un trasfondo apropiado para sus rasgos pálidos y bien marcados y sus largas manos exquisitas: dejando aparte el puro, recordaba un retrato de Moroni[125], el cual habría plasmado maravillosamente su mirada impenetrable y su aire distinguido; y un retrato del gran maestro habría sido un compañero tan animado como Grandcourt estaba dispuesto a ser. Pero respondió sin su retraso habitual:

—El día diez.

—Supongo que pretendes quedarte aquí.

—Iremos a Ryelands durante un tiempo; pero regresaremos aquí por la caza.

Tras estas palabras Grandcourt hizo el sonido inarticulado y lánguido con el que solía indicar que iba a continuar hablando, y Lush esperó para oír algo

más. Nada fue dicho, e iba a hacer otra pregunta, cuando se reemprendió de nuevo el sonido inarticulado introduciendo una sugestión expresada suavemente:

—Es mejor que te busques alguna cosa.

—¿Qué? ¿Tengo que cortar con todo y salir corriendo? —dijo Lush, preparado para mostrarse de buen humor ante la ocasión.

—Algo así.

—La novia me beta. Espero que ella te compense por la falta de mis servicios.

—No puedo hacer nada por que seas tan abominablemente desagradable para las mujeres —dijo Grandcourt, disculpándose tranquilamente.

—Para una mujer, si no te importa.

—Da lo mismo, ya que es la mujer de la que hablamos.

—Supongo que no se me va a dejar a la deriva tras quince años sin alguna provisión.

—Debes haber ahorrado algo a mi costa.

—Casi nada. Lo que he hecho es ahorrar para ti.

—Puedes contar con trescientas libras al año. Pero tienes que vivir en la ciudad y estar listo para ocuparte de mis cosas para cuando quiera. Voy a estar mal de dinero.

—Si no vas a estar en Ryelands este invierno, puedo ir hasta allí y hacerte saber cómo va Swinton.

—Como quieras. Me importa poco donde estés, mientras te mantengas fuera de vista.

—Muy agradecido —dijo Lush, capaz de tomarse el asunto mejor de lo que había esperado. Le reconfortaba su convicción secreta de que de aquí a un tiempo le necesitaría tanto como antes.

—No creo que pondrás ninguna pega a que recojas tus cosas tan pronto como puedas —dijo Grandcourt—. Los Torrington van a venir, y la señorita Harleth llegará a caballo.

—Por supuesto. ¿Puedo servir de ayuda si voy a Gadsmere?

—No. Ahí voy yo.

—Sobre lo de que vas a estar mal de dinero, ¿has pensado en ese plan de…?

—Déjame solo de una vez, ¿vale? —dijo Grandcourt, en su tono audible más bajo, arrojando el puro al fuego, y levantándose para salir a dar un paseo.

Pasó la noche en la soledad de su escritorio más pequeño, donde, con varias nuevas publicaciones sobre la mesa, del tipo de las que a un caballero le gusta tener a mano sin tocarlas, empleó su tiempo (como habría hecho un filósofo) sentándose meditativamente en un sofá y absteniéndose de literatura, ya fuera género político, cómico, cínico o romántico. De esta forma las horas pueden pasar sorprendentemente rápido, sin el duro e invisible trabajo de ir en pos de la filosofía; no por el amor al pensamiento, sino por odio al esfuerzo, por un estado del mundo interior, algo así como la edad prematura, donde la necesidad de la acción se pierde en una mera imagen de lo que ha sido, es, y será o podrá ser; donde el impulso nace y muere en un mundo fantasmal, deteniéndose para rechazar incluso las realizaciones más imprecisas. Ese es un estado que suele llegar con las canas; y a veces, también, sucede una obstinación intensa por seguir las reglas, símbolo de un egoísmo desmesurado, tan manifiesto como lo fueron las distintas susceptibilidades de los años jóvenes que ya se fueron.

Pero el pelo de Grandcourt, aunque no tuviera mucho, era de un rubio fino, y su estado de ánimo no es que estuviera decaído. Por dentro de nosotros, mortales, corre una extraña química espiritual, de manera que un estancamiento debido a la pereza o incluso un avance despreocupado puede ir preparando no se sabe qué material mordaz o explosivo. Un minero que despierta de su sueño y que sin malicia lanza una piedra que se lleva la vida de su compañero que aún duerme, puede dar una idea de lo impredecible que puede ser una persona en sus acciones; de la misma forma incluso un caballero puede resultar un personaje de riesgo, por la incertidumbre de lo que puede seguir haciendo, y arruinar tristemente el compañerismo.

Los pensamientos de Grandcourt esa noche eran como los pequeños círculos que se ven en un estanque oscuro, continuamente cerrándose y volviéndose a generar por algún impulso bajo la superficie. El impulso central más profundo venía de la imagen de Gwendolen; pero los pensamientos que suscitaba no serían ilustrados del todo bien con una referencia a los poetas románticos de cualquier época. Era llamativo que su satisfacción no provenía de su convicción de que Gwendolen estuviera enamorada de él; ni de que el amor hubiera estado por encima del resentimiento celoso por el que ella había huido de él. Por el contrario, creía que esta chica era excepcional en el hecho de que, a pesar de sus asiduas atenciones hacia ella, no estaba enamorada de él; y le pareció muy posible que si no hubiera sido por la repentina pobreza que había caído sobre su familia, no le habría aceptado. Desde el principio

experimentó una exasperante fascinación por la elegancia con la que ella había —no acogido sus atenciones—, sino escapado de ellas. Había sido llevada por las circunstancias a aceptarle a pesar de todo, a arrodillarse como un caballo entrenado para el ruedo, aunque ella tuviera todavía sus objeciones. En suma, Grandcourt obtuvo un placer superior de esta forma que si hubiera conseguido a una chica de la que hubiera estado seguro de su predisposición hacia él. Y aún así, este placer en doblegar la aversión florecía junto con la creencia habitual de que no había mujer a la que favoreciera que permaneciera impasible bajo su influencia personal; y no le parecía improbable que en poco tiempo Gwendolen estuviera más enamorada de él que él de ella. En cualquier caso, tendría que someterse; y disfrutaba pensar que sería su futura mujer, cuyo orgullo y genio eran apropiados para dar órdenes a cualquiera menos a él. No le habría gustado una mujer que se deshiciera en ternura hacia él, llena de ansiedad suplicante y obediencia sumisa. Quería dominar a una mujer a la que le habría gustado dominarlo a él, y que tal vez habría sido capaz de dominar a otro hombre.

Lush, al haber fracasado en el intento de su advertencia a Grandcourt, pensó que haría bien en comunicarse con Sir Hugo, sobre el cual, como hombre que tenía quizás el suficiente interés como para conseguir un lugar sobre el que trabajar al aire libre, y conseguirlo de forma caballerosa, sin que fuese mal pagado, estaba ansioso por cultivar un sentimiento de deuda amistosa, no estando nada seguro de que se necesitase tal lugar. Escribió la siguiente carta, y la envió a Park Lane, adonde sabía que la familia había regresado tras su viaje a Leubronn:

> Mi querido Sir Hugo:
>
> Desde que llegamos a casa, se ha decidido del todo la boda, y va a tener lugar en menos de tres semanas. Es todavía peor para él que la madre de ella haya perdido toda su fortuna, pues tendrá que hallar provisiones. Grandcourt, lo sé, se resiente de la falta de efectivo; y a menos que recurra a algún otro plan, va a intentar reunir dinero de una forma estúpida. Yo voy a dejar Diplow inmediatamente, y no voy a poderme hacer cargo del tema. Lo que le aconsejo es que el señor Deronda, del que sé tiene su confianza, propusiera venir a hacer una visita aquí, según alguna invitación (va a haber más gente en la casa), y que usted le ponga en total posesión de sus deseos y del posible alcance de su oferta. Luego, que él introdujera el tema a Grandcourt de forma que se vea que usted no sospecha en absoluto que él quiere conseguir dinero, solo que usted tiene un gran deseo de conseguir la finca. Lo que yo he llegado a decirle en alguna ocasión ha sido alguna insinuación de que a usted le podría interesar dar una fuerte suma de dinero por hacerse con Diplow; pero si el señor Deronda viniera armado con una oferta definitiva, las cosas cambiarían de aspecto. Apostaría diez a uno que no cerraría el trato inmediatamente; pero la propuesta se aferraría en su cabeza; y aunque por el momento tiene muchas ganas de continuar cazando aquí, veo una posibilidad, por las circunstancias, que se acabe cansando del vecindario, y prevalecerá la idea del dinero rondando a su alrededor sin presionarlo. Apuesto a que al final

usted se hará con él. Como no voy a exiliarme a Siberia, sino que estaré disponible, es posible, que de aquí a un tiempo, pueda serle de más ayuda. Pero de momento no creo que haya un intermediario mejor que el señor Deronda. Nada pone a Grandcourt de peor humor que tener a los abogados revoloteando a su alrededor.

Confiando en que su visita a Leubronn le haya preparado magníficamente para el invierno, me pongo, mi querido Sir Hugo, a su entera disposición,

THOMAS CRANMER LUSH.

Sir Hugo, al recibir esta carta durante el desayuno, se la entregó a Deronda, el cual, a pesar de disponer de habitaciones en la ciudad, apenas residía en ellas, pues Sir Hugo no podía pasar sin él. Al locuaz baronet le habría gustado la compañía de un joven incluso aunque no hubiera habido entre ellos razones particulares que los unieran: uno con un rostro amigable e incorrupto bastaba para mantener una visión optimista de la posteridad y de la herencia en general, aunque hubiera decepciones particulares; y su afecto por Deronda no quedaba mermado por la profunda aunque no molesta diferencia en sus ideas y gustos. Tal vez por eso era más fuerte; pasaba como con esa especie de diferencias que hay entre un hombre y una mujer que hace unirlos más en lugar de distanciarlos. Sir Hugo aprobaba su propia conducta; pero miraba a los hombres y a la sociedad desde un punto de vista liberal, y tenía cierto orgullo en lo que difería Deronda de él, que si lo hubiera expresado con palabras habría sido de esta forma: «Mirad a este magnífico joven, no es como los que se ven cada día, ¿verdad? Es algo mío en cierto modo, lo crie desde que era un niño; pero no es fácil de catalogar, tiene sus propias ideas, y es el polo opuesto de lo que era yo a su edad». Su tío pensaba así por el equilibrio que manifestaba Deronda, movido por una sensibilidad que podríamos llamar hasta femenina, que le hacía entregarse a los más pequeños detalles, a la vez que mostraba cierta inflexibilidad en su juicio, una independencia de opinión, totalmente masculina.

Cuando acabó de leer la carta, la devolvió sin hablar, dolido interiormente ante el modo de Lush de atribuirle una utilidad neutral en los asuntos de la familia.

—¿Qué opinas, Dan? Sería bastante agradable para ti. No has visto el lugar desde hace ya muchos años, y podrías hacer carreras con los galgos si bajaras la semana que viene —dijo Sir Hugo.

—No iría por ese motivo —dijo Deronda, untando atentamente su pan de mantequilla. No estaba de acuerdo con este modo tan transparente de persuasión, ante el cual cualquier animal inteligente respondería con

indiferencia. Si fuera a Diplow, estaría haciendo algo desagradable para complacer a Sir Hugo.

—Creo que la idea de Lush es buena. Y sería una pena perder la ocasión.

—Eso es una cuestión diferente, si usted cree que para sus intereses es importante que vaya —dijo Deronda, todavía de esa forma esquiva que implicaba que no lo decía todo. Sabía que el baronet se había empeñado en el asunto.

—Además, no me extrañaría que vieras de nuevo a la bella jugadora, la Diana de Leubronn —dijo Sir Hugo alegremente—. Tendremos que invitarla a la Abadía, cuando estén casados, Louisa —añadió dirigiéndose a Lady Mallinger, como si también ella hubiera leído la carta.

—No me hago a la idea de a quién te refieres —dijo Lady Mallinger, que, de hecho, no había estado escuchando, al haber estado ocupando su mente con los primeros sorbos del café, los mejorables puños de su manga, y la necesidad de llevar a Theresa al dentista, preocupaciones inocentes y en parte laudables, como solía tener la amable señora. Si se preguntara por su apariencia, podría decirse que tenía el pelo rubio rojizo (el pelo de la época), una pequeña nariz romana, ojos azules algo prominentes y párpados delicados, con una figura que sus amigas más esbeltas la definirían como gorda, pues sus manos mostraban curvas y hoyuelos como las de un bebé magnificado.

—Me refiero a que Grandcourt se va a casar con la chica que viste en Leubronn, ¿no te acuerdas de ella?, la señorita Arlet, la que solía jugar en la ruleta.

—¡Dios santo! ¿Es ella una buena pareja para él?

—Eso depende de qué es lo que entienda él por buena —dijo Sir Hugo, sonriendo—. Sin embargo, ni ella ni sus amigas tienen nada, y le acarreará a él gastos. Esa unión es buena para mis propósitos, porque si estoy dispuesto a entregar una suma de dinero, puede estar dispuesto a dejar libre Diplow, de forma que podamos disponer de él nosotros, y cuando yo muera tendréis el consuelo de ir al lugar donde os gustaría ir, vaya yo donde vaya.

—Me gustaría que no hablases de morirte de esa forma tan ligera, querido.

—Es más bien una forma pesada, Lou, pues tendré que pagar una fuerte suma, cuarenta mil, al menos.

—Pero ¿por qué vamos a invitarlos a la Abadía? —dijo Lady Mallinger —. No me gustan las mujeres que apuestan, como la señora Cragstone.

—Oh, no la tendrás que atender ni una semana. Además, ella no es que sea como la señora Cragstone porque apueste un poco, igual que yo no soy mediador porque sea un Whig[126]. Quiero mantener de buen humor a Grandcourt y dejarle ver todo lo máximo de este lugar para que piense menos en Diplow. Todavía no sé si conseguiré que me escuche sobre esto. Y si Dan fuera a hacer una visita allí, podría enseñarle nuestras cartas. Me haría un gran servicio. —Se refería a Deronda.

—A Daniel no le cae bien el señor Grandcourt, creo, ¿no? —dijo Lady Mallinger, mirando a Deronda interrogativamente.

—Es imposible evitar a todos los que a uno le resultan poco agradables —dijo Deronda—. Iré a Diplow, no se me ocurre que tenga algo mejor que hacer, ya que Sir Hugo lo desea.

—¡Es mejor que me sustituyas! —dijo Sir Hugo, encantado—. Y si no te resulta muy agradable, es experiencia que ganas. Nada solía sentarme mal cuando era joven. Has de ver a los hombres y sus modales.

—Sí, pero ya he visto a ese hombre, y también parte de sus modales —dijo Deronda.

—No buenos modales, supongo —dijo Lady Mallinger.

—Bueno, ya ves que esos modales tienen éxito con las de tu sexo —dijo Sir Hugo, provocativamente—. Y era un tipo inusitadamente hermoso cuando tenía veintidós o veintitrés años, como su padre. Aunque no hizo como su padre al casarse con la heredera. Si se hubiera llevado a la señorita Arrowpoint y además mis tierras, ¡qué demonios!, habría tenido un bonito principado.

Deronda, al anticipar la proyectada visita, sintió menos aversión que en un principio. El drama del matrimonio de esta chica le interesaba: lo que había oído de Lush acerca de que ella había huido de la petición del hombre al que ahora iba a tomar por esposo había arrojado nueva luz sobre su forma de apostar; y era probablemente el paso de ese espíritu mundano febril a la pobreza lo que la había obligado a aceptar aquello que debía haberle provocado en cierto modo repulsión. Todo esto implicaba una naturaleza sujeta a las dificultades y al esfuerzo —elementos de la vida que tenían una especial atracción hacia su compasión, debido tal vez a su prematuro dolor por darle vueltas a la supuesta historia de su propia existencia—. Las personas le atraían, como lo había hecho Hans Meyrick, en proporción a su posibilidad de defenderlas, rescatarlas, pasar por sus vidas con una especie de influencia redentora; y tenía que resistir su tendencia, fácilmente explicable, a alejarse

fríamente del afortunado. Pero en la disposición que le había llevado a redimir el collar de Gwendolen, y que todavía actuaba en él, había algo más allá de su fervor compasivo habitual, algo debido a la fascinación de su feminidad. Era muy receptivo a ese tipo de encantos, y lo mezclaba con las imágenes utópicas pero conscientes de su propio futuro; aún así, cualquiera que hubiera sido capaz de definir con precisión su carácter habría imaginado que era más probable que amara a una mujer sin decírselo que muchos otros hombres menos pasionales. Arrojad un poco de comida ante un pajarillo delicado: nada hay que tomaría más gustoso, y aún así se mantiene al margen a causa de su sensibilidad hacia lo desconocido que para vosotros es imperceptible. Y un hombre difiere de otro, así como todos diferimos del bosquimano[127], en nuestra sensibilidad hacia lo desconocido, que proviene de un conjunto de necesidades, espirituales u otras. Que su imaginación estuviera tan ocupada con dos mujeres parecía presagiar la capacidad de reserva de Deronda, pues no había pensado que fuera posible cortejar a ninguna de las dos. Hans Meyrick se había reído de él por tener algo del caballero errante en su modo de ser; y habría encontrado su prueba si hubiera sabido lo que justo ahora pasaba por la mente de Deronda con relación a Mirah y a Gwendolen.

Escribió sin demora para anunciar su visita a Diplow, y le aseguraron cortésmente como respuesta que su venida constituiría un gran placer. Lo cual no era, en realidad, falso. Grandcourt pensó que era probable que la visita hubiera sido motivada por el deseo de Sir Hugo de halagarle por un propósito por el que no se decidía; y no era una idea desagradable que este buen hombre, del que creía era su primo ilegítimo, sería testigo, tal vez hasta con ciertos celos, de que Henleigh Mallinger Grandcourt tenía el papel principal de amante comprometido al matrimonio con una espléndida chica cuyo primo ya había observado con admiración.

El mismo Grandcourt no era celoso de nada a menos que amenazara su control, el cual no creía que fuese probable perderlo.

Capítulo 29

> Quien quiera que me hable con voz correcta,
> sea él o sea ella, yo le seguiré,
> como el agua sigue silenciosamente a la luna,
> con pasos fluidos allí donde va alrededor del mundo.
>
> WALT WHITMAN[128]

—AHORA MIS PRIMOS ESTÁN EN DIPLOW —DIJO GRANDCOURT— ¿IRÁS ALLÍ?, ¿mañana? El carruaje vendrá a por la señora Davilow. Podrás decirme cómo quiere que se arreglen las habitaciones. Hay que poner las cosas en orden mientras estemos fuera en Ryelands. Y mañana es el único día.

Estaba sentado de lado en un sofá del salón en Offendene, con una mano y un codo en la espalda, y la otra colocada entre sus rodillas cruzadas, en la actitud de un hombre muy interesado en observar a la persona que tiene enfrente de él. Gwendolen, a la que siempre le habían aburrido los trabajos de costura, los había retomado con un aparente celo tras su compromiso, y ahora sostenía una pieza de bordado blanca que un examen minucioso habría mostrado numerosas punzadas erróneas. Durante los últimos ocho o nueve días habían pasado las horas principalmente a caballo, pero siempre se habían dejado un margen para este tipo de compañerismo más complicado, que, no obstante, Gwendolen no había encontrado desagradable. Estaba muy satisfecha con Grandcourt. Sus respuestas a las decididas preguntas que ella le hacía sobre qué había visto y hecho en su vida, eran pronunciadas muy lentamente. Desde el principio, se había dado cuenta que él sabía lo que decir; y ella sentía constantemente no solo que no tenía nada de tonto, sino que en cierta forma sutil le comunicaba la impresión de que toda la locura provenía de los demás, y que hacía lo que a él no le importaba hacer. Un hombre que parece haber sido capaz de alcanzar lo mejor, tiene un soberano poder de depreciación. Y el comportamiento de Grandcourt como pretendiente apenas había superado el límite de un homenaje amoroso, tan inofensivo como el aroma que llega de las rosas, y que gastaba todo su efecto en una vanidad placentera. Un día, sin embargo, no besó su mejilla sino su cuello, un poco por detrás de su oreja; y Gwendolen, cogida por sorpresa, se levantó con gran agitación, lo cual hizo que también él se levantara y dijera:

—Te ruego me perdones, ¿te he molestado?

—Oh, no es nada —dijo Gwendolen, más temerosa de sí misma—, solo que no soporto que me besen detrás de la oreja. —Se sentó de nuevo con una pequeña risita juguetona, pero a la vez sentía que su corazón latía con un miedo indefinido: ya no tenía la libertad de despreciarlo como había despreciado al pobre Rex. Su agitación no parecía poco halagüeña, y él tuvo que contenerse para no seguir transgrediendo.

Ese día una ligera lluvia impedía montar a caballo; pero para compensar, había llegado de Londres un paquete, y la señora Davilow acaba de salir de la sala tras admirar las cosas hermosas (que había hecho traer Grandcourt) y que estaban esparcidas por encima de las mesas. Gwendolen estaba disfrutando del paisaje de su vida. Dejó caer las manos sobre su falda y dijo con mucha picardía:

—¿Por qué es mañana el único día?

—Porque al siguiente día es el primero con los galgos —dijo Grandcourt.

—¿Y después?

—Después tengo que irme por un par de días, es un fastidio, pero tengo que irme un día y volver al día siguiente —Grandcourt observó un cambio en su cara, y puso su mano, que tenía en la rodilla, sobre las manos de ella, y dijo —: ¿no quieres que me vaya?

—No importa lo que yo quiera —dijo Gwendolen, fríamente. Se estaba resistiendo al máximo a la tentación de decirle que sospechaba a quién iba a ver, y a la tentación de confesarlo todo y hablar sin tapujos.

—Sí, claro que importa —dijo Grandcourt, envolviendo su mano—. Aplazaré la ida. Y viajaré de noche, para estar fuera solo un día. —Creía que conocía la razón de lo que por dentro pensaba ser un poco de carácter, y le parecía que ella era particularmente fascinante en estos momentos.

—En ese caso no aplaces el viaje, pero viaja de noche —dijo Gwendolen, sintiendo que podía darle órdenes, y hallando en esta urgencia un pequeño desahogo para su irritación.

—¿Entonces irás a Diplow mañana?

—Oh, sí, si así lo deseas —dijo Gwendolen, en un alto tono de asentimiento despreocupado. Su concentración en otros sentimientos le había impedido darse cuenta de que le sostenía la mano.

—¡Cómo nos tratáis a nosotros, pobres hombres! —dijo Grandcourt, bajando su tono de voz—. Siempre nos toca lo peor.

—¿Ah sí? —inquirió Gwendolen, mirándole de forma más ingenua que lo habitual. Anhelaba por creer que este juego de palabras escondiera la cruda verdad sobre su prometido: en ese caso, también ella estaba justificada. Si ella lo sabía todo, la señora Glasher sería más culpable que Grandcourt—. ¿Siempre te toca lo peor?

—Sí. ¿Eres tú tan amable conmigo como yo lo soy contigo? —dijo Grandcourt, mirándole estrechamente a los ojos.

Gwendolen se sintió tocada. Era consciente de haber recibido mucho, que su sentido del mando estaba bajo control, y se hundió del todo al percibir que, por mucho que mirara a su alrededor, ya no podía dar marcha atrás: era como si hubiera consentido en montar en una carroza en la que otro llevaba las riendas; y no entraba dentro de su naturaleza saltar ahora ante los ojos del mundo. No era ignorante cuando había consentido, y todo lo que podía decir ahora sería reconocer que no había sido ignorante. Había dejado escapar su derecho a una explicación. Todo lo que podía hacer ahora era acomodarse, de forma que las espinas de esa penitencia indeseada que le imponía la conciencia no la martirizaran. Tras un pequeño temblor, decidió resueltamente cambiar su actitud mental. Hubo una pequeña pausa, durante la cual ella no apartó los ojos; y sonriendo de repente dijo:

—Si fuera tan amable contigo como tú lo eres conmigo, eso arruinaría tu generosidad: no sería tan grande como podría ser, y es, ahora.

—Entonces no voy a pedirte un beso —dijo Grandcourt, satisfecho por pagar un gran precio por este nuevo modo de coqueteo, que permitía introducir el tema del matrimonio por contraste.

—¡Ni uno! —dijo Gwendolen, de forma insolente, y mirándole con desafío.

Él se llevó su pequeña mano izquierda a los labios y luego la soltó con respeto. Era un elogio muy débil decir de él que no era desagradable: era casi encantador; y en esos momentos sintió que no era probable que hubiera podido amar nunca a un hombre más que a este. Su reticencia le daba a ella una consciencia inexplicable y maravillosa.

—A propósito —dijo ella, retomando su trabajo—, ¿hay alguien más además del Capitán y la señora Torrington en Diplow? ¿O los dejaste cara a cara? Supongo que él habla de habanos y ella responde con su moño.

—Ella tiene a una hermana consigo —dijo Grandcourt, con una sombra de sonrisa—, y hay además dos hombres, uno de los cuales tú ya lo conoces, creo.

—Ah, entonces, tendré una pobre opinión de él —dijo Gwendolen sacudiendo la cabeza.

—Le viste en Leubronn, el joven Deronda, un joven compañero de los Mallinger.

Gwendolen sintió como si el corazón le diera un vuelco, y sus dedos, que intentó mantener firmes en su trabajo, se enfriaron.

—Nunca he hablado con él —dijo, temiendo que se le notara cualquier alteración—. ¿No es desagradable?

—No, no especialmente —dijo Grandcourt, en su modo más lánguido—. Se cree alguien importante. Creí que te lo habían presentado.

—No. Alguien me dijo su nombre la noche anterior a que me marchara. Eso fue todo. ¿Qué es?

—Una especie de pupilo de Sir Hugo Mallinger. Nadie importante.

—¡Oh, pobrecillo! ¡Qué desagradable debe ser para él! —dijo Gwendolen, hablando de boquilla, sin pretender ningún sarcasmo—. ¡Me pregunto si ha dejado de llover! —añadió, levantándose y yendo a mirar a la ventana.

Por suerte no llovió al día siguiente, y Gwendolen fue hasta Diplow montada sobre Criterion como había hecho aquel día anterior en el que volvió con su madre en el carruaje. Siempre se sentía de lo más intrépida cuando iba vestida con sus ropas de montar; además, tenía la agradable convicción de que le sentaban perfectamente, la sensación permanente de que resultaban formidables para cualquier ocasión. Su enfado hacia Deronda se había transformado en un terror supersticioso, debido, tal vez, a la coacción que había ejercido sobre su pensamiento, no fuera que esa primera interferencia de él en su vida pudiera presagiar alguna influencia futura. Las supersticiones se construyen sobre este tipo de hechos: un intenso sentimiento que hace que el brillo de la estrella de la noche se cierna sobre nosotros como una amenaza, o que la bendición de un mendigo nos anime. Y las supersticiones acarrean consecuencias que muy a menudo verifican sus esperanzas o sus presentimientos.

Gwendolen aprovechó los momentos antes del desayuno para inspeccionar las habitaciones con la señora Torrington y la señora Davilow; y pensó que probablemente, si veía a Deronda, apenas haría falta más que una ligera inclinación entre ellos. Quería reparar en él lo mínimo posible.

Y al final resultó que su curiosidad fue más fuerte que su orgullo. Desde el primer momento en que estuvieron juntos en la sala, le parecía que no hacía

más que fijarse en él: todo lo demás era la actuación automática de un guion habitual.

Cuando él tomó asiento en el almuerzo, Grandcourt dijo:

—Deronda, la señorita Harleth me ha dicho que no fuisteis presentados en Leubronn.

—La señorita Harleth apenas me recuerda, me imagino —dijo Deronda, mirándola de forma sencilla, mientras se saludaban inclinando la cabeza—. Estaba muy ocupada cuando la vi.

Y bien, ¿acaso suponía que ella no sospechaba que fuera él la persona que rescató su collar?

—Al contrario. Me acuerdo de usted muy bien —dijo Gwendolen, sintiéndose algo nerviosa, pero controlándose y mirándole a su vez con detenimiento—. Usted no aprobó que jugara a la ruleta.

—¿Cómo llegó a esa conclusión? —dijo Deronda, con gravedad.

—Oh, me lanzó un mal de ojo en mi juego —dijo Gwendolen, girando la cabeza y sonriendo—. Comencé a perder tan pronto como usted vino a mirarme. Había estado ganando hasta entonces.

—Es muy aburrida la ruleta en una perrera como Leubronn —dijo Grandcourt.

—Yo lo encontré aburrido cuando empecé a perder —dijo Gwendolen. Había vuelto el rostro hacia Grandcourt y sonreía mientras hablaba, pero dirigió una mirada de soslayo a Deronda, y vio que tenía sus ojos fijos en ella con una mirada tan penetrante que le produjo una herida más profunda que su sonrisa irónica ante sus pérdidas, más aún que la opinión de Klesmer. Giró un poco el cuello como si quisiera escuchar qué decían los demás, aunque pensaba solo en Deronda. Su rostro tenía esa forma y expresión perturbadoras que amenazan con hacer cambiar a uno de opinión, como si siempre estuviera uno equivocado. (¿Quién no ha visto a personas con este tipo de poder correctivo en su rostro hasta que su conversación o su acción les desdicen?). Su voz, que la oía ahora por primera vez, comparada con el tono neutro y arrastrado de Grandcourt que llevaba días oyendo, era como el contraste entre las notas profundas de un violoncello y el discurso roto de señoríos acomodados a la luz de un atardecer. Grandcourt, pensó ella por dentro, tenía quizás razón al decir que Deronda se creía demasiado importante: una buena manera de explicar una superioridad que humilla. No obstante, la conversación mudó al tema de la plaga del ganado y a Jamaica; y ya nada más se dijo respecto a la ruleta. Grandcourt era de la opinión que el negro

jamaicano era del tipo Calibán[129] baptista; Deronda dijo que siempre se había sentido de parte de Calíbán, el cual tenía naturalmente su propio punto de vista y podía cantar una buena canción; la señora Davilow comentó que su padre tenía una hacienda en Barbados, pero que ella nunca había estado en las indias americanas; la señora Torrington estaba segura de que nunca dormiría en su cama si tenía que vivir entre negros; su marido la corrigió diciendo que sería fácil manejar a los negros si no fuera por los mestizos; y Deronda remarcó que los blancos tenían que estar agradecidos por los mestizos.

Mientras esta guerra cortés de lanzarse pelotas continuaba, Gwendolen jugaba con la gelatina, y miraba a cada conversador por turnos para poder sentirse a gusto cuando miraba a Deronda.

—Me pregunto qué pensará de mí realmente. Tiene que haberse sentido interesado por mí, si no, no me habría enviado mi collar. ¿Qué pensará de que me case? ¿Qué es lo que sabe para que parezca tan serio? ¿Por qué ha venido a Diplow?

Estas preguntas corrían por su mente a la vez que la voz de un anhelo intranquilo de ser juzgada por Deronda con una admiración pura —un anhelo que había tenido su germen en su primer resentimiento por su mirada crítica —. ¿Por qué le importaba tanto la opinión de este hombre que no era «nadie importante»? No podía encontrar la razón —tal vez porque ocupaba demasiado tiempo en preocuparse—. En la sala de estar, cuando hubo algo que requirió que Grandcourt saliese, se acercó sin pensarlo a Deronda, que estaba de pie en una mesa aparte dándole la vuelta a unos grabados, y le dijo:

—¿Irá mañana a cazar, señor Deronda?

—Sí, creo que sí.

—Luego no está en contra de la caza.

—Se puede encontrar alguna justificación. Es un pecado que me atrae, siempre que no pueda ir en barca o jugar al crícket.

—¿Está en contra de que yo cace? —dijo Gwendolen, levantando con rebeldía la mandíbula.

—No tengo ningún derecho a estar en contra de nada de lo que usted elija.

—Pensó que tenía derecho a estar en contra de que apostase —insistió Gwendolen.

—Me sabía mal. Pero no soy consciente de haberle expresado mi desaprobación —dijo Deronda, con su habitual mirada directa, penetrante, sin que por eso hubiera ninguna intención. Sus ojos tenían una peculiaridad que ha puesto en problemas a muchos hombres: eran de una intensidad oscura,

aunque apacible, que parecían expresar un interés especial en cada persona sobre la que los fijaba, y atraía con facilidad las demandas de los que necesitan ayuda, sugeridas probablemente por su carácter ardientemente compasivo. Cuando se trata de mendigar, hacemos de la bondad de los demás una razón para pedirles demandas desorbitadas. Gwendolen estaba experimentando este tipo de efecto.

—Me impidió apostar de nuevo —respondió ella. Pero tan pronto como terminó de hablar enrojeció toda su cara y el cuello; y Deronda enrojeció también, consciente de que en el pequeño asunto del collar se había tomado una libertad discutible.

Era imposible continuar hablando; y ella se volvió hacia una ventana, sintiendo que había dicho estúpidamente lo que no había querido decir, pero aún así se sentía satisfecha de haber provocado este mutuo entendimiento. Tampoco a Deronda le desagradaba. Gwendolen parecía mucho más atractiva que antes; y ciertamente se habían producido cambios en ella desde aquellos momentos en Leubronn; la toma de conciencia del error producido había despertado algo así como una nueva alma, que tenía mejores posibilidades, aunque también peores, que las de su porte anterior de pura confianza en sí misma; entre las fuerzas que ella había llegado a temer había algo dentro de ella que no la hacía sentirse bien.

Esa noche la señora Davilow dijo:

—¿Fue realmente así, o solo una broma tuya, lo de que el señor Deronda arruinó tu juego, Gwen?

Se había excitado su curiosidad y podía arriesgarse a preguntar por algo que no concernía al señor Grandcourt.

—Oh, solo sucedió que se hallaba mirando cuando empecé a perder —dijo Gwendolen, sin darle importancia—. Me fijé en él.

—No me extraña: es un joven sorprendente. Me hace recordar algunas pinturas italianas. Una adivinaría sin que se lo dijera nadie que tiene sangre extranjera en sus venas.

—¿La tiene? —dijo Gwendolen.

—Eso dice la señora Torrington. Le pregunté en concreto quién era, y me dijo que su madre era una extranjera de alta cuna.

—¿Su madre? —dijo Gwendolen, algo bruscamente—. Entonces, ¿quién era su padre?

—Bueno, todo el mundo dice que es el hijo de Sir Hugo Mallinger, que le crio, aunque pasa por su pupilo. Dice que si Sir Hugo Mallinger hubiera

podido hacer lo que quisiera con sus fincas, se las habría dejado al señor Deronda, ya que no tiene ningún hijo legítimo.

Gwendolen permanecía en silencio; pero su madre observó un efecto tan marcado en su rostro que se enfadó consigo misma por haber repetido los chismorreos de la señora Torrington. Parecía, al reflexionar sobre ello, inadecuado para los oídos de su hija, pues a la señora Davilow no le gustaba que tuviera lo que se conoce como conocimiento del mundo; y de hecho, ni para ella misma deseaba que se le hubiera impuesto tal conocimiento.

Inmediatamente la mente de Gwendolen creó una imagen de la madre desconocida, sin duda una mujer de ojos oscuros, probablemente triste. Apenas podía parecerse menos un rostro al de Deronda que el que representaba a Sir Hugo en un retrato a la cera en Diplow. Una hermosa mujer de ojos oscuros, que ya no era joven, se le representaba a Gwendolen «por caso de verdadera conciencia»[130].

Esa noche, cuando se había acostado en su pequeña cama, y solo iluminaba la estancia la débil luz de una vela, dijo:

—Mamá, ¿tienen normalmente niños los hombres antes de casarse?

—No, querida, no —dijo la señora Davilow—. ¿Cómo preguntas eso? — Pero empezó a darse cuenta que sabía el por qué.

—Si fuera así, debería saberlo —dijo Gwendolen con cierta indignación.

—Estás pensando en lo que dije sobre el señor Deronda y Sir Hugo Mallinger. Eso es un caso muy raro, querida.

—¿Lo sabe Lady Mallinger?

—Sabe lo suficiente como para quedarse satisfecha. Eso está claro, ya que el señor Deronda ha vivido con ellos.

—¿Y la gente no piensa mal de él?

—Bueno, está claro que parte con cierta desventaja: no es como si fuera el hijo de Lady Mallinger. No puede heredar sus propiedades, y no es nadie importante para el mundo. Pero la gente no tiene por qué saber nada de su nacimiento; ya ves, cae muy bien.

—Me pregunto si él lo sabe; y si está enfadado con su padre.

—Mi querida niña, ¿por qué piensas eso?

—¿Por qué? —dijo Gwendolen, impetuosamente, sentándose en su cama —. ¿No tienen los hijos motivos para estar enfadados con sus padres? ¿Cómo pueden hacer que sus padres se casen o no?

Pero de repente se le abrieron los ojos, y se dejó caer de nuevo sobre su almohada. No era solo por lo que había sentido unos meses antes —que

pudiera parecer que reprochara a su madre su segundo matrimonio—; lo que ahora sentía sobre todo era que había sido conducida hacia una condena que parecía hacer de su propio matrimonio algo prohibido.

No se habló más del tema, y hasta que el sueño se apoderó de ella, Gwendolen estuvo dándole vueltas a los motivos que se oponían al matrimonio, motivos que la presionaban de nuevo ahora que se reflejaban inesperadamente en la historia de un hombre cuya breve relación con ella se habían, por alguna afinidad oculta, arraigado en lo más profundo de su alma. Era característico que, en todo su debate, no le había preocupado la cuestión de si la insostenibilidad de su matrimonio no incluía el hecho de que había aceptado a Grandcourt solo como el hombre con el que a ella le convenía casarse, y no en lo más mínimo como el hombre al que elegía atarse como un deber. Las ideas de Gwendolen eran lamentablemente toscas; pero a menudo las grandes dificultades de la vida son las que crean nuestra torpeza. Y para juzgar sabiamente supongo que debemos saber cómo aparecen las cosas al ignorante; así es como se ha producido gran parte de la historia del mundo.

Por la mañana, tuvo un doble motivo de entusiasmo. Iba a ir a cazar, algo que los escrúpulos sobre el decoro casi se lo impiden, hasta que resultó que a la señora Torrington también le gustaba bastante montar a caballo y se ofreció a acompañarla; iba a ir a cazar por primera vez desde su escapada con Rex; e iba a ver de nuevo a Deronda, sobre el que, desde la noche pasada, había sentido tanto interés que, esperaba, igual que la gente espera cuando las celebridades se descubren, ver algo en su apariencia que había dejado de notar anteriormente. ¿Qué iba él a ser? ¿Qué tipo de vida tenía ante él, no siendo nadie importante? Y por solo un pequeño cambio de sucesos, podría haber sido tan importante como Grandcourt, no, aún más —su imaginación iba inevitablemente en ese sentido—, podría haber tenido las mismas fincas que Grandcourt iba a poseer. Pero ahora, Deronda la vería probablemente algún día señora de la Abadía en Topping, y llevando el título que habría sido de su propia mujer. Estos simples y fútiles pensamientos de lo que podía haber sido, marcaron una nueva época para Gwendolen. Ella, cuyo hábito incuestionable había sido sacar lo mejor de lo que se presentase sin que le costase nada, veía ahora la posición que la tentaba a la luz de una nueva dimensión, como una dura e injusta exclusión de otras personas. Lo que había oído de Deronda le parecía en su imaginación que lo situaba a él en el mismo grupo que la señora Glasher y sus hijos, ante los cuales sentía que debía adoptar una actitud de disculpa, ella que había estado hasta entonces rodeada por un grupo de

personas que en su opinión tenían necesidad de manifestar una actitud de disculpa ante ella. Tal vez el mismo Deronda estuviese pensando sobre estas cosas. ¿Conocería a la señora Glasher? Si supiera que ella lo sabía, la despreciaría; pero podía no tener tal conocimiento. Sin él, ¿la despreciaría por casarse con Grandcourt? Su posible opinión sobre sus acciones la estaba afectando tan inoportunamente como la opinión de Klesmer sobre sus aptitudes; pero creyó que sería más fácil defenderse de la desaprobación de su matrimonio, porque es más fácil justificar nuestra conducta ante nosotros mismos que conseguir que nuestra habilidad convenza a los demás. «¿Cómo puedo evitarlo?» no es nuestra disculpa favorita por nuestra incompetencia. Pero Gwendolen se sintió con fuerzas para decirse:

«¿Cómo puedo evitar lo que los demás han hecho? Las cosas no se arreglarían si ahora cambiara de opinión y declarara que no me casaré con el señor Grandcourt». Y de ese cambio de opinión no había ni que pensarlo. Los caballos del carruaje en el que había montado iban a toda velocidad.

Este estado de desesperación eufórica propio de la juventud iba y venía como las mareas. Prefería seguir hacia delante que escoger volver hacia atrás, hacia la humillación; e incluso la tranquilizaba pensar que habría hecho tan mal en cualquiera de las dos opciones. Pero la acción inmediata y fascinante que venía ahora era la caza, en la que vería a Deronda y en la que él la vería a ella; pues continuamente le acechaba la impresión, que apartaba cualquier otro pensamiento, que él tenía mucho interés en ella. Pero ese día se había decidido a no repetir la locura del día anterior, como si estuviera ansiosa de decirle algo. Sí, la caza lo absorbería todo.

Y así fue durante un tiempo. Deronda estaba allí, a la vista, muy a menudo; pero solo aumentaba el estímulo de un placer que Gwendolen solo había probado una vez anteriormente, y del que parecía que iba siempre a disfrutar independientemente de lo que fuera mal, excepto de que ocurriera algo que le impidiera seguir montando a caballo. No sucedió ningún accidente que los uniera; la cacería tuvo lugar a una distancia adecuada de la casa, y en la agradable sombra de la tarde gris de noviembre, con una larga capa de luz amarilla en el oeste, Gwendolen volvía con el grupo de Diplow, que cuidaban de ella en el camino hacia Offendene. Ahora que la sensación de excitación gloriosa se había ido, se sentía terriblemente decepcionada de que no hubiera tenido ninguna oportunidad de hablar con Deronda, al que ya no volvería a ver hasta que se fuera en un par de días. ¿Qué iba a decirle? No estaba muy segura. Quería hablar con él. Grandcourt estaba a su lado; la señora

Torrington, su marido y otros caballeros iban por delante; y podía oír por detrás el caballo de Deronda. El deseo de hablar con él y de que él hablara con ella era cada vez más imperioso; y no había manera de conseguirlo, a menos que expresara su deseo desafiándolo todo. Cuando tuviera una oportunidad, tenía que hacerlo. Acababan de salir de un bosque de pinos y hayas, donde la tranquilidad del crepúsculo tenía un efecto represivo, que aumentaba su impaciencia. Los cascos de los caballos que se oían a cierta distancia por detrás la irritaban cada vez más. Frenó su caballo con las riendas y miró hacia atrás; Grandcourt, tras unos pasos, también se detuvo; pero ella, agitando su látigo y ladeando la cabeza con actitud divertida, dijo:

—¡Sigue! Quiero hablar con el señor Deronda.

Grandcourt dudó; pero ¿qué podía hacer tras esa proposición? Era una situación embarazosa para él. Ningún caballero, antes de casarse, podía mostrar su negativa a una orden dada de esta forma tan graciosa. Continuó cabalgando lentamente, y ella esperó a que Deronda le alcanzara. La miró interrogativamente sin decir nada, y ella dijo inmediatamente, dejando que su caballo fuera al lado del suyo:

—Señor Deronda, debe usted despejar mi ignorancia. Quiero saber por qué pensó que no era correcto que apostara. ¿Es por qué soy una mujer?

—No totalmente; pero lo lamenté más porque usted era una mujer —dijo Deronda, con una sonrisa irreprimible. Aparentemente debía darse ya por supuesto entre ellos que fue él quien envió el collar—. Creo que sería mejor que los hombres no apostaran. Es un gusto por el que uno puede perder la cabeza, es como caer en una enfermedad. Y, además, algo se revuelve en mi interior al recoger una gran cantidad de dinero y reírme entre dientes, cuando otros están sintiendo su pérdida. Es algo que definiría incluso como infame, si fuera algo más que un desliz excepcional. Se producen los suficientes e inevitables cambios de fortuna que nos obligan a ver que nuestra ganancia es la pérdida de otro: ese es uno de los aspectos desagradables de la vida. A uno le gustaría reducirlo tanto como pudiera, y no divertirse a costa de exagerarlo. —La voz de Deronda reunía cierta indignación mientras iba hablando.

—Pero usted admite que hay cosas que no podemos evitar —dijo Gwendolen bajando el tono. La respuesta no había sido nada de lo que esperaba—. Me refiero a que las cosas son así y no podemos hacer nada; no podemos evitar que nuestra ganancia sea la pérdida de otros.

—Precisamente. Por eso, debemos evitarlo siempre que podamos.

Gwendolen, mordiéndose el labio, hizo una pequeña pausa, y obligándose de nuevo a hablar con aire divertido, dijo:

—¿Pero por qué lo lamenta usted más a causa de que sea una mujer?

—Tal vez porque necesitamos que ustedes sean mejores que nosotros.

—Pero supongo que *nosotras* necesitamos que sean los hombres quienes sean mejores —dijo Gwendolen, con una pequeña expresión de haber hecho jaque.

—Eso es una buena objeción —dijo Deronda, sonriendo—. Supongo que debería haber dicho que cada uno de nosotros piensa que es mejor que los demás sean buenos.

—Ya ve, yo necesité que usted fuera mejor de lo que fui, y usted pensó lo mismo —dijo Gwendolen, asintiendo y soltando una risa, mientras adelantó su caballo y se unió a Grandcourt, que no hizo ninguna observación.

—¿No quieres saber lo que le dije al señor Deronda? —dijo Gwendolen, cuyo orgullo propio requería dar cuentas de su conducta.

—Oh, no —dijo Grandcourt fríamente.

—Pues esta es la primera palabra descortés que has dicho: que no quieres oír lo que tengo que decir —dijo Gwendolen haciéndose la enfurruñada.

—Quiero oír lo que me digas a mí, no a otros hombres —dijo Grandcourt.

—Entonces querrás oír esto. Quería que me contara por qué estaba en contra de que apostara, y me dio un pequeño sermón.

—De acuerdo, pero ahórrame el sermón. —Si Gwendolen se imaginaba que a Grandcourt le importaba que hablara con Deronda, quería que entendiera que se equivocaba. Pero no le gustaba que le dijeran que continuara cabalgando a solas. Ella vio que estaba picado, pero no le dio importancia. Había cumplido su objetivo de hablar de nuevo con Deronda antes de que alzara su sombrero y se volviera con los demás hacia Diplow, mientras su prometido la esperaba en Offendene, donde iba a despedirse ante su ausencia de un día por su viaje no especificado. Grandcourt había dicho la verdad al referirse al viaje como un fastidio: iba a ir en tren hasta Gadsmere.

Capítulo 30

> Ni penitencias ni confesiones:
> ningún sacerdote lo decreta, y aún así se encuentran obligados a sentarse
> en medio de las cenizas de sus años desaparecidos.

IMAGINAD UNA CASA DESPERDIGADA Y RESTAURADA, SU MEJOR PARTE CONSTRUIDA con piedra gris y recubierta con baldosas rojas, una torre redonda sobresaliendo en una esquina, y sobre la parte oscura que queda entre dos luces una veleta con forma de gallo, objeto agradable tanto entre los reflejos y el verdor del verano como entre las nubes bajas y las ramas nevadas del invierno; un terreno a la sombra por los árboles que se extienden por él: un gran cedro floreciendo por un lado, algunos abetos escoceses por la parte trasera colgando sus raíces desnudas sobre una ribera escarpada, y más allá, una colonia de grajos; por el otro lado un estanque rodeado de matorrales, donde los patos aletean y gorjean; a los alrededores, un vasto prado, que bien podría llamarse un parque, rodeado por una antigua plantación y protegido por muros de piedra que parecen pequeñas prisiones. Fuera de las verjas se halla el campo, que una vez fue completamente rural y encantador, y ahora es negro por las minas de carbón, habitado principalmente por hombres y mozuelos con linternas adheridas a sus cascos, y con una complexión diabólica, lo que hace que recelen de ellos los chicos de Gadsmere, los cuatro niños preciosos, que llevaban viviendo allí unos tres años. Ahora, en noviembre, cuando las alfombras florales estaban vacías, los árboles sin hojas, y las aguas sucias del estanque temblando, uno diría que el lugar concordaba sombríamente con las negras carreteras y los negros montones de tierra que parecían poner de luto la región; salvo cuando los chicos jugaban en la grava con los perros. Pero a la señora Glasher, bajo las circunstancias actuales, le gustaba Gadsmere tanto como le habría gustado cualquier otro alojamiento. El completo aislamiento del lugar, que aseguraba el nulo atractivo que ofrecía la región, era perfecto para su gusto. Cuando condujo a sus dos potrillos con un carrito lleno de niños, no había señores distinguidos con los que encontrarse, tan solo hombres de negocios que iban en carruajes simples de dos ruedas conducidos por un solo caballo; en la iglesia no había ojos a los que evitar, pues la mujer del cura y el mismo cura no conocían ninguno de los dos nada

acerca de su desgracia, o bien la ignoraban: para ellos era simplemente una señora viuda, la inquilina de Gadsmere; y el nombre de Grandcourt tenía poco interés en ese distrito comparado con los nombres de Fletcher y Gawcome, los arrendatarios de las minas.

Habían pasado ya diez años desde la fuga de la bella mujer de un oficial irlandés con el joven Grandcourt, y el consiguiente duelo en el que las balas habían herido solo al aire había hecho algo de ruido. La mayoría de los que recordaban el asunto se preguntaban ahora qué había sido de esa señora Glasher cuya belleza y esplendor la habían elevado a la eminencia en lugares extranjeros, donde se sabía que vivía con el joven Grandcourt.

Que él debía desconectarse de tal relación parecía algo natural y hasta deseable. En cuanto a ella, todo el mundo pensó que una mujer que había abandonado a su hijo junto a su marido había caído todavía más bajo. Grandcourt, por supuesto, se cansó de ella. Era muy dado al cortejo de mujeres; pero un hombre de su posición querría para entonces conseguir un matrimonio adecuado con la joven y bella hija de alguna casa de la nobleza. Nadie hablaba de la señora Glasher ahora, de la misma forma que no se hablaba de la víctima de un homicidio involuntario ocurrido diez años atrás; era como una vasija perdida para la que nadie enviaría una expedición para ir en su busca. Pero Grandcourt era visto como un marinero que volvía al puerto ondeando sus colores, tan fresco como siempre.

Sin embargo, Grandcourt nunca se desentendió en realidad de la señora Glasher. Su pasión por ella había sido la más fuerte y duradera que había conocido; y aunque estaba ahora tan muerta como la música de una flauta cuarteada, había dejado cierta inclinación, que a la muerte de su marido tres años atrás le había suscitado la duda de casarse con ella, de acuerdo con lo que habían llegado a expresar a menudo durante los primeros días de su ardiente pasión. En esa temprana época, Grandcourt habría pagado gustoso el divorcio para conseguir la libertad de ella, pero el marido no le complació, no queriendo casarse de nuevo, ni deseando que se airearan sus problemas domésticos.

El equilibrio que el paso de los años trajo a la señora Glasher era justo el contrario. Al principio ella estaba en comparación totalmente despreocupada por la posibilidad de volverse a casar. Era suficiente haber escapado de un marido desagradable y haber encontrado una especie de éxtasis con un amante que la había fascinado por completo: joven, apuesto, amoroso, y viviendo al mejor estilo, con un equipo y una conversación apropiados, del estilo

esperado en jóvenes de fortuna que lo han visto todo. Era una mujer apasionada y vivaz, inclinada a la veneración, y exasperada por cinco años de grosería conyugal; y la sensación de alivio era tan fuerte que aquietó la ansiedad y pudo disfrutar. No le importaba mantener una posición ambigua; no tenía envidia de los honores de una mujer despreciada y aburrida; la única mancha que empañaba su visión de su nuevo mundo feliz, era la sensación de haber abandonado a su niño de tres años, que murió dos años después, y cuyas primeras palabras diciendo «mamá» conservaban una diferencia respecto los niños que vinieron luego. Pero ahora los años habían traído muchos cambios aparte de los producidos en el contorno de sus mejillas y su garganta; y que Grandcourt se casara con ella se había convertido en su deseo dominante. La posición ambigua a la que no le había importado someterse ella misma le pasaba ahora factura por sus hijos, a los que amaba con una devoción cargada con una pasión añadida de expiación. No se arrepentía de nada salvo en este sentido. Si Grandcourt se casaba con ella, los chicos no recibirían la peor parte por lo que había pasado: verían a su madre en una posición digna, y no estarían en desventaja con el mundo: su hijo sería el heredero de su padre. Era el anhelo por este resultado lo que otorgaba una importancia suprema al sentimiento de Grandcourt hacia ella; su amor por él había desembocado desde hacía tiempo en la ansiedad de que él le ofreciera el único y permanente derecho de ser su mujer, y no esperaba más felicidad en el matrimonio que la satisfacción de su amor maternal y el orgullo, incluyendo su orgullo por sí misma delante de sus propios hijos. Para conseguir su objetivo estaba preparada incluso con una firmeza trágica para soportar cualquier cosa en silencio en su matrimonio; y tenía la suficiente agudeza para tratar con disimulo el tema y aprovecharse de las vacilaciones de Grandcourt, no molestándole con quejas apasionadas o montándole escenas. Sus incalculables cambios de humor, y su tendencia a endurecerse si se le imploraba, habían creado en ella, como en cualquier persona más que quisiese algo de él, un temor razonable: algo que había tardado en descubrir, y que ningún presentimiento hacía presagiar en el porte de un joven amante con un rostro de hermosas facciones y de las maneras más dulces. Pero esta mujer apasionada había tenido que pagar un precio por su mutismo, y estaba aún más amargada por ello. No hay desánimo —incluso el impuesto sobre los desamparados o agraviados—, que no produzca otro tipo de consecuencias: el aguijón retenido iba acumulando veneno. Era absolutamente dependiente de Grandcourt; pues aunque él siempre había sido liberal en los gastos de ella, lo

había mantenido todo expresamente a su nombre; y ante el objetivo del matrimonio, ella no iba a pedir más. Él había dicho que nunca iba a fijar nada, salvo su testamento; y cuando ella pensaba en las alternativas del futuro, se le ocurría a menudo, que incluso si no llegaba a ser la mujer de Grandcourt, él nunca tendría un hijo que pudiera reclamar legítimamente su herencia, con lo que su propio hijo sería el heredero de sus fincas. En esa época no parecía que pudiera llegar otro hijo que se pareciera más a su padre que el que tenían. Pero convertirse en la mujer de Grandcourt estaba tan lejos de ser una mera posibilidad extravagante, que incluso Lush lo había considerado, y había dicho de su compañero que apostaría por ello con igual probabilidad que cualquier otra posibilidad. Lush, de hecho, al deducir que Grandcourt tenía previsto usar su residencia en Diplow para ganarse a la señorita Arrowpoint, se entusiasmó en apoyar ese plan, tomándolo como una tácita renuncia al matrimonio con la señora Glasher, que durante mucho tiempo había sido el punto de referencia para el capricho vacilante de Grandcourt. Pero ambos proyectos fueron descartados al aparecer Gwendolen en escena; y era bastante natural que la señora Glasher acogiera con entusiasmo el plan de Lush de impedir el nuevo peligro creando una barrera en la mente de la chica que estaba siendo cortejada. Lo acogió con un entusiasmo lleno de pasión y de intención, derramando parte del veneno que había ido acumulando.

Después de eso, se enteró por Lush de la huida de Gwendolen, y que se habían librado de cualquier probabilidad de peligro por parte de ella; pero no le llegó ninguna carta contándole que había vuelto el peligro y que se había materializado en una certeza. Desde entonces había estado escribiendo a Grandcourt como lo hacía habitualmente, y él había estado tardando más de lo normal en responderle. Justo cuando él iba en camino de Gadsmere, ella había estado pensando que tal vez se decidiera a volver con ella; no había perdido la esperanza —¿qué otra persona podría pensar lo contrario?—, que cierto debilitamiento debido a su cortejo frustrado podría disponerle a reconsiderar más fácilmente sus antiguas intenciones.

Grandcourt tenía dos serios propósitos para venir a Gadsmere: transmitir las noticias de su inminente matrimonio en persona, para acabar con esta primera dificultad; y conseguir que Lydia le devolviera los diamantes de su madre, que se los había confiado a ella hace mucho tiempo para que los llevara. A su persona le sentaban muy bien los diamantes y conseguía que parecieran dignos del valor que se había pagado por ellos. Estos diamantes en particular no es que derrochasen grandes rayos de luz, eran unas joyas con

forma de guisantes y judías para las orejas, el cuello y el cabello; pero bien valían algunos miles, y Grandcourt quería recuperarlos sin falta para su mujer. Anteriormente, cuando le había pedido a Lydia que se los devolviera, simplemente para que estuvieran más seguros y depositarlos en el banco, se había manifestado serena pero absolutamente en contra, declarando que estaban totalmente a salvo; y al final dijo: «Si alguna vez te casaras con otra mujer te los entregaría; ¿vas a casarte con otra mujer?». Por entonces Grandcourt no tenía motivos que le forzaran a insistir, y conservaba esta gentileza, que su tendencia a ejercer su poder bien acobardando o bien decepcionando a otros, o incluso suscitándoles una rabia que no se atrevían a expresar —una tendencia activa en él mientras otras propensiones permanecían apagadas—, no había servido de nada ante Lydia. Un intérprete severo habría dicho que los simples factores de su relación, la posición melancólica de esta mujer que dependía de su voluntad, conformaba un banquete espléndido para el gusto de él por dominar. Pero había algo más que esto en su paciencia hacia ella: estaba el efecto rescatado, aunque metamorfoseado del poder que ella había tenido sobre él; y era este efecto, el desliz intermitente y gris hacia las solicitaciones que una vez tenían el entusiasmo que ahora habían perdido, que una y otra vez le habían predispuesto a casarse con un pasado familiar antes que levantar las expectativas de la novedad. Pero ahora la novedad le había atrapado y le obligaba a sacar el máximo partido de ella.

La señora Glasher estaba sentada en la agradable estancia donde solía pasar las mañanas con sus hijos alrededor de ella. Tenía una ventana cuadrada que sobresalía mirando al ancho campo de gravas y hierba, que conducía a un pequeño arroyo que acababa en el estanque. La parte superior de un armario bajo de color negro, la vieja mesa de madera de roble, las sillas tapizadas en cuero se mezclaban con los juguetes, libros y prendas de jardín de los chicos, bajo la maternal mirada de una dama dibujada al pastel que miraba desde un lienzo colgado en la pared con sonrisa indulgente. Todos los chicos estaban allí. Las tres niñas sentadas alrededor de la madre cerca de la ventana eran retratos en miniatura de ella: de ojos oscuros y piel morena y fina, mejillas sonrosadas, la nariz y las cejas perfectamente delineadas como si fueran mujeres diminutas, siendo la mayor de apenas nueve años. El niño estaba sentado en la alfombra a cierta distancia, inclinando su cabecita rubia sobre los animales de un arca de Noé, amonestándolos a cada uno con voz amenazadora, y de vez en cuando chupando los que tenían manchas para ver

si mantenían los colores. Josephine, la mayor, estaba recibiendo su clase de francés; y las otras, con sus muñecas en sus faldas, estaban sentadas recatadamente recordando imágenes de la Madonna. La señora Glasher se había arreglado con mucho esmero, lo había hecho cada día desde que pensó que Grandcourt podía volver. Su cabeza, que a pesar de su cansancio, conservaba una belleza imborrable en su bello perfil, en los rizos de sus cabellos, y en sus cejas marcadas, se alzaba imponente sobre sus prendas bronceadas de seda y terciopelo y el primer collar de oro que Grandcourt había colocado en su cuello hacía años. No es que disfrutara arreglándose; al verse en el espejo lo primero que se le ocurría era: «¡Qué cambiada estoy!». Pero lo bueno que aún quedaba en ella lo iba a conservar. Si su principal deseo se veía satisfecho, podía imaginarse a sí misma apropiándose de la belleza de una dama lista para acoger el rango más alto. Los pequeños rostros a su lado, reducciones casi exactas del suyo propio, parecían dar cuenta de las florecientes curvas que habían estado anteriormente donde ahora solo quedaba una palidez hundida. Pero los chicos besaban las pálidas mejillas y nunca las encontraban deficientes. Ese amor era ahora la única finalidad de su vida.

De repente, la señora Glasher apartó la vista del libro de Josephine y escuchó.

—¡Silencio, querida! Creo que viene alguien.

Henleigh, el niño, saltó y dijo:

—Mamá, ¿es el molinero con mi burro?

No obtuvo respuesta, y acercándose a la rodilla de su mamá repitió su pregunta en un tono insistente. Pero la puerta se abrió, y el sirviente anunció al señor Grandcourt. La señora Glasher se levantó agitada. Heinleigh le frunció el ceño disgustado porque no fuera el molinero, y las tres niñas pequeñas dirigieron tímidamente sus ojos hacia él. A ninguno de ellos les gustaba en particular este amigo de su mamá —de hecho, cuando cogió la mano de la señora Glasher y se volvió luego para posar su otra mano sobre la cabeza de Henleigh, el enérgico vástago comenzó a dar golpes al brazo del amigo con sus puños para apartarlo—. Las niñas se sometieron tímidamente a ser acariciadas bajo la barbilla y a un beso, pero claramente parecía mejor mandarlas al jardín a jugar y danzar con los perros en las gravas.

—¿De dónde has venido? —dijo la señora Glasher, mientras Grandcourt se sacaba el sombrero y el abrigo.

—De Diplow —contestó lentamente, sentándose enfrente de ella y dirigiéndole una mirada inadvertida, que ella notó.

—Estarás cansado, entonces.

—No, descansé en el Junction, un escondite horroroso. Estos viajes en tren son siempre un fastidio. Pero he tomado café y he fumado.

Grandcourt se sacó su pañuelo, se frotó la cara, y al devolver el pañuelo a su bolsillo miró a su pierna cruzada y a su bota irreprochable, como si estuviera ante un extraño, en vez de ante una mujer que temblaba en suspense con cada palabra y mirada suya que podían inclinarla hacia la esperanza o el temor. Pero él estaba realmente interesado en su entrevista y sabía muy bien qué tenía que incluir en ella. Imaginad la diferencia en el grado de emoción entre esta mujer a quien los años habían llevado a una dependencia más consciente y a un ardor más profundo, y este hombre, a quien lo habían arrastrado a una obstinación cada vez más neutral.

—Esperaba verte, hace tanto que no oigo nada de ti. Supongo que las semanas parecen más largas en Gadsmere que en Diplow —dijo la señora Glasher. Tenía un modo rápido e incisivo de hablar que parecía ir con sus rasgos, como el tono y el timbre de un violín van con su forma.

—Sí —dijo Grandcourt lentamente—. Pero encontraste el dinero pagado en el banco.

—Oh, sí —dijo la señora Glasher, de forma seca, comenzando a impacientarse. Antes, o al menos le daba la sensación, Grandcourt siempre había estado más por ella y por los niños que ahora.

—Sí —reanudó él, jugando con sus bigotes, sin mirarla al principio—, el tiempo me ha pasado bastante rápido; normalmente no lo hace. Pero han pasado varias cosas, como sabes; al decir esto volvió sus ojos hacia ella.

—¿Qué es lo que sé?

Hizo una pausa antes de decir, sin cambiar su tono:

—Que estaba pensando en casarme. ¿Viste a la señorita Harleth?

—¿Te lo dijo *ella*?

Las pálidas mejillas parecían aún más pálidas, quizás por el fiero brillo que mostraban sus ojos por encima de ellas.

—No, me lo dijo Lush —fue la lenta respuesta. Era como si unas manos hubieran arrastrado los objetos de tortura fuera del alcance de la vista de la víctima expectante.

—¡Santo cielo! Di de una vez que te vas a casar con ella —explotó pasionalmente, temblándole la rodilla y con los puños fuertemente cerrados.

—Por supuesto, este tipo de cosas deben suceder más tarde o más temprano, Lydia —dijo; realmente ahora que había comenzado la tortura, no quería hacerla sufrir más de la cuenta.

—Nunca viste la necesidad.

—Quizás no. La veo ahora.

En estas breves palabras dichas por lo bajo por Grandcourt, sintió una resistencia tan absoluta como si sus delgados dedos hubieran estado empujando una puerta de hierro fuertemente cerrada. Sabía que estaba desamparada, y procuró no mostrarlo, no quería suplicar a oídos sordos ni agarrarse a un cuerpo muerto, solo ver el rostro inmutable y sentir los miembros rígidos. Ni lloró ni habló: se había quedado bloqueada por la súbita certeza que había caído como un jarro de agua fría y que la dejó meditativa y convulsionada por la emoción. La esperanza perdida por la que había luchado y que no había podido alcanzar le provocó en estos primeros momentos una sensación horrible. Al fin, se levantó con un esfuerzo convulso, e inconsciente de todo salvo su desdicha, apoyó la frente contra el frío y duro cristal de la ventana. Los niños, que jugaban en la grava, lo tomaron como un signo de que los quería dentro, y corrieron a ponerse delante de ella con sus dulces caras mirándole expectantes. Esto la animó: sacudió la cabeza, los condujo de nuevo hacia fuera, y exhausta por este penoso esfuerzo se hundió en la silla más cercana.

Grandcourt también se había levantado. Estaba doblemente molesto: por la escena en sí, y por la sensación de que no podía librarse de ella por muy autoritario que se mostrara; pero había que continuar con la tarea, y estaba la necesidad administrativa de arreglar las cosas de forma que dieran los mínimos problemas en el futuro. Estaba inclinado contra el borde de la chimenea. Ella le miró y dijo amargamente:

—Todo esto no te importa nada. Yo y los niños somos criaturas inoportunas. Quieres marcharte de nuevo y estar con la señorita Harleth.

—No hagas que el asunto sea más desagradable de lo que ya lo es, Lydia. No sirve de nada pretender cambiar las cosas que no pueden alterarse. Por supuesto es endemoniadamente desagradable para mí ver cómo tú misma te haces desgraciada. He hecho este viaje para decirte a lo que tienes que hacerte a la idea: os mantendré a ti y a los niños como siempre; y se acabó.

Silencio. Ella no se atrevió a responder. Esta mujer con la mirada intensa y ansiosa había encerrado la angustia de una madre en su alma, y la había hecho a veces capaz de una represión más dura que los gemidos o que la

lucha. Pero por debajo del silencio fluía una corriente de odio y venganza: deseaba que el casamiento hiciera infelices a dos personas más, además de a ella. Por el momento, él continuó:

—Será lo mejor para vosotros. Podréis seguir viviendo aquí. Pero pienso despachar de vez en cuando una buena suma de dinero para ti y los niños, y podréis vivir donde queráis. No habrá nada de lo que te puedas quejar, entonces. Pase lo que pase, te sentirás segura. No podía haber hecho nada de antemano. Todo ha ido demasiado rápido.

Grandcourt concluyó su lenta entrega de frases. No esperaba que se lo agradeciera, pero consideraba que podía estar razonablemente satisfecha, si era posible para Lydia estar satisfecha. Ella no mostró ningún cambio, y, tras un minuto, él añadió:

—Nunca has tenido motivos para temer que fuera un avaro. Me importa un bledo el dinero.

—Si te importara, supongo que no nos lo darías —dijo Lydia. No pudo reprimir el sarcasmo.

—Es injusto y perverso que digas algo así —replicó Grandcourt, en un tono bajo—; y te aconsejo que no vuelvas a decir ese tipo de cosas.

—¿Me castigarías dejando a los niños en la miseria? —Una vez soltado el veneno, no había quien la parara.

—Nadie está diciendo de dejar a los niños en la miseria —dijo Grandcourt, todavía en su bajo tono—. Te aconsejo no decir cosas de las que podrías arrepentirte.

—Estoy acostumbrada a arrepentirme —dijo amargamente—. Tal vez seas tú el que te arrepientas. Siempre te has arrepentido de amarme.

—Todo esto no hará más que poner las cosas más difíciles para que nos volvamos a ver. ¿Qué amigo tienes además de mí?

—Cierto.

Pronunció esta palabra como un gemido suave. Al mismo tiempo le sobrevino un breve destello: el deseo de que él, tras prometerse una felicidad mejor de la que había tenido con ella, sintiera una miseria y soledad que le condujeran de nuevo a ella para encontrar ciertos recuerdos de un tiempo en el que era joven, feliz y lleno de esperanza. Pero no. Él continuaría el camino sin agravio alguno. Era ella la que tenía que sufrir.

De esta forma pusieron fin a las palabras picantes. Grandcourt había pensado en un principio quedarse hasta la noche; ahora quería acortar su visita, pero no había un tren más temprano que el que había previsto para

regresar, y tenía todavía que hablar con Lydia del segundo objeto de su visita, que al igual que una operación quirúrgica, parecía requerir un intervalo. Tenían que pasar las horas; había que comer; los niños entraron de nuevo: todo este mecanismo de la vida tenía que recorrerse con la triste sensación de represión que a menudo se siente en las disputas domésticas del tipo más común. Para Lydia representaba cierto alivio para su furia sofocada tener a los niños presentes: sentía una gloria brutal en su hermosura, como si se mofara de Grandcourt con toda su indiferencia hacia ella y hacia ellos, como si fuera soltando secretamente su veneno, que era fuertemente imaginario. Él se conducía con toda la ventaja de un hombre cuya gracia en su porte había sido moldeada por una experiencia de aburrimiento: acunó a la pequeña Antonia, que estaba sentada con sus manos cruzadas y sus ojos vueltos hacia su cabeza calva, que la impresionó como algo digno de observación, y se reconcilió con Henleigh prometiéndole una hermosa silla de montar y una brida. Solo las dos niñas mayores le habían conocido como una presencia continua; y los años intermedios habían superpuesto sus recuerdos infantiles con una timidez que el porte de Grandcourt no era probable que disipara. Él y Lydia, ocasionalmente, en presencia de los sirvientes, hacían alguna observación convencional; de otra manera no hablaban; y continuamente le volvía a Grandcourt el pensamiento de su propio capricho de haberle entregado esos diamantes, cosa que le obligaba a padecer la molestia de tener que hablar de ellos. Tenía un cuidado muy arraigado de lo que consideraba pertenecía a su casta, y sobre la propiedad le gustaba sentirse señor; también le parecía indigno para sí mismo tener que pedir cualquier cosa del mundo. Pero por mucho que afirmara su independencia del pasado de la señora Glasher, su propio pasado era un yugo más fuerte que cualquiera que se hubiera impuesto. Tenía que pedir los diamantes que había prometido a Gwendolen.

Al fin, quedaron solos de nuevo, con las lámparas encima de ellos, cara a cara. Grandcourt miró a su reloj, y luego dijo, arrastrando aparentemente con indiferencia sus palabras:

—Hay una cosa que tengo que mencionar, Lydia. Mis diamantes, los tienes tú.

—Sí, los tengo yo —respondió enseguida, levantándose de pie con los brazos caídos y los dedos entrecruzados, mientras Grandcourt permanecía sentado tranquilo. Ella había esperado el tema y ya había decidido lo que iba a hacer. Pero lo pretendía llevar a cabo, si era posible, sin exasperarle. Durante

las horas de silencio, había deseado recordar las palabras que habían abierto la brecha entre ellos.

—Están en esta casa, imagino.

—No, no están en esta casa.

—Creí que dijiste que los guardabas contigo.

—Cuando lo dije, era cierto. Ahora están en el banco en Dudley.

—Sácalos, ¿de acuerdo? Tengo que tomar medidas para entregárselos a alguien.

—No tomes ninguna medida. Serán entregados a la persona que quieres. Yo tomaré las medidas.

—¿Qué quieres decir?

—Lo que he dicho. Siempre te he dicho que se los entregaría a tu mujer. Voy a mantener mi palabra. Todavía no es tu mujer.

—Esto es una bobada —dijo Grandcourt en tono de hastío. Era muy irritante que su indulgencia hacia Lydia le hubiera dado una especie de control sobre él a pesar de su condición dependiente.

Ella no habló. Él también se levantó, pero permaneció apoyado en la chimenea con solo una parte de su rostro vuelto hacia ella.

—Tengo que entregar los diamantes antes de que me case —empezó de nuevo.

—¿Cuál es el día de tu boda?

—El diez. No podemos perder tiempo.

—¿Y dónde irás después de casarte?

Él no replicó, pero se puso más malhumorado. Al final dijo:

—Tienes que concertar una cita con el banco antes de entonces, sacarlos y verte conmigo o con alguien más a quien enviaré, pues para mí es un gran fastidio. Escoge un día.

—No, no voy a hacer eso. Ella los recibirá sin problemas. Voy a mantener mi palabra.

—¿Quieres decir —dijo Grandcourt, en voz casi imperceptible, volviéndose para mirarla de frente—, que no lo harás tal y como te he dicho?

—Sí, eso quiero decir —fue la respuesta que le salió, mientras sus ojos centellearon cerca de los suyos. La pobre criatura fue inmediatamente consciente de que si sus palabras iban a tener algún efecto en su suerte, este iba a ser negativo, y podía anular toda la ventaja que le quedaba por su larga paciencia. Pero la palabra ya había sido dicha.

Él se hallaba en una posición de lo más irritante. No podía sacudirla ni ponerle la mano encima; y si pudiera, el hecho no le devolvería los diamantes. Quería evitar el único modo de amenaza que podía asustarla, si le creía. Y en general, no había nada que odiara más que verse obligado a emplear la violencia, incluso de palabras: su voluntad debía imponerse por sí misma sin problemas. Tras mirarla unos instantes, volvió de nuevo el rostro, apoyándose como antes, y dijo:

—¡Idiotas infernales son las mujeres!

—¿Por qué no me dices adónde vas a ir después de casarte? Podría estar en la boda si quisiera, y saberlo allí —dijo Lydia, sin asustarse de la forma suicida de amenaza que tenía su poder.

—Por supuesto, si quieres, puedes hacer de mujer loca —dijo Grandcourt, con voz baja de desprecio—. No creo que te pares a pensar si saldrá algo bueno de eso, o si estás en deuda conmigo.

Estaba en un estado de hastió y amargura totalmente nuevo en la historia de la relación entre ellos. Era innegable que esta mujer a la que había permitido profundizar tanto en su vida tenía una capacidad terrible de irritar; y la precipitación temeraria de su forma de actuar habían dejado sus oportunidades abiertas. Él se dio cuenta con su orgullo que tenía muy pocas posibilidades si la amenazaba, y se quedó varios minutos en silencio repasando la situación, considerando cómo podía convencerla. Al contrario que él, ella tenía una naturaleza directa, con ciertas tendencias muy marcadas, y había una manera que había probado a menudo y que pensaba que podía contar con ella ahora. Como le había dicho Sir Hugo, Grandcourt sabía cómo jugar sus cartas en cada ocasión.

No volvió a hablar, sino que miró su reloj, hizo sonar la campana, y mandó que le trajeran el vehículo inmediatamente. Luego se apartó de ella, se puso a caminar como si esperara una llamada, y permaneció en silencio sin volver los ojos hacia ella.

Ella estaba sufriendo el terrible conflicto entre cargar con las culpas o seguir con su tenacidad. Se imaginó a Grandcourt marchándose sin ni siquiera mirarla, y ella abandonada en solitaria incertidumbre, sin saber nada de él, sin saber si ella había causado daño a sus hijos, sintiendo que tal vez había conseguido que él la odiara: vio toda la miseria de una criatura que había frustrado sus propias razones. Y aún así, no podía soportar abandonar el propósito que representaba un dulce bocado para su venganza. Si no hubiera sido madre se habría sacrificado gustosamente por su venganza, por lo que

creía que era justo: impedir la felicidad de otra, transfiriéndole su miseria. Estaban en lucha estas dos pasiones dominantes. Tenía que satisfacerlas las dos.

—No nos separemos enfadados, Henleigh —empezó ella, sin cambiar de sitio ni de actitud—: es una cosa muy pequeña la que pido. Si me negara a devolverte lo que llamas tuyo, sería diferente: eso podría ser una razón para tratarme como si me odiaras. Pero pido tan poco. Si me dices dónde vas a ir el día de tu boda, me encargaré de que se le entreguen los diamantes sin escándalo. Sin escándalo —repitió suplicante.

—Esos caprichos absurdos hacen que una mujer sea odiosa —dijo Grandcourt, sin apartar la mirada ni moverse—. ¿De qué sirve hablar a gente que está loca?

—Sí, soy estúpida, la soledad me ha hecho estúpida, compréndeme. —Dejó escapar un sollozo mientras decía—: si me consientes esta pequeña tontería, me comportaré apaciblemente, nunca te molestaré. —Rompió en un llanto histérico, y luego dijo casi gritando—: Seré muy apacible después de esto.

Había una extraña mezcla de actuación y realidad en esta pasión. Se mantenía firme en su propósito como un niño que cierra la mano tras robar un pequeño objeto, mientras llora y lo niega. Incluso a Grandcourt le pilló por sorpresa: este deseo caprichoso, esta violencia infantil, era tan inusual en el comportamiento de Lydia como incongruente lo era con su persona. Ambos habían llevado siempre consigo un sello de dignidad. Con todo, parecía más manejable en este estado que en su anterior actitud de desafío. Se acercó de nuevo a ella, y dijo, en su tono autoritario:

—Cálmate, y escucha lo que te digo. Nunca te perdonaré si te presentas otra vez armándome una escena.

Ella se frotó la cara con su pañuelo, y cuando pudo hablar firmemente dijo, con la voz amortiguada que prosigue a los llantos:

—No lo haré, si me dejas hacer las cosas a mi modo, te prometo que no me abalanzaré de nuevo. Nunca he faltado a mi palabra. ¿Cuántas veces has roto tú la tuya? Cuando me diste los diamantes para llevarlos, no pensabas en tener otra mujer. Y ahora te los devuelvo, no te lo reprocho, solo te pido que me dejes hacer las cosas a mi manera. ¿No lo he sobrellevado todo bien? Se me ha quitado todo, y cuando pido una pajita, una astilla, me la niegas. —Había hablado rápido, pero tras una pequeña pausa, dijo más despacio, libre ya su voz del tono amortiguado—: No soportaré que me lo niegues.

Grandcourt se sentía confundido, como si tuviera que tratar con algo parecido a la locura; solo podía salir airoso cediendo. El sirviente anunció que estaba listo el coche. Cuando la puerta se cerró de nuevo, Grandcourt dijo, hoscamente:

—Vamos a ir a Ryelands, pues.

—Se le entregarán allí —dijo Lydia con decisión.

—Muy bien, me voy. —No tenía ganas ni de cogerle la mano: le había fastidiado muy a fondo. Pero ahora que ella había ganado esta batalla, podía humillarse para aplacarlo.

—Perdóname; nunca más te molestaré —dijo, con mirada suplicante. Por dentro pensaba claramente: «Solo soy yo la que tengo perdonar». Aún así estaba obligada a pedir perdón.

—Será mejor que mantengas esa promesa. Me has hecho sentir fatal, como nunca me había sentido, con tu locura —dijo Grandcourt, al parecer escogiendo la frase más dura de su repertorio.

—¡Pobrecillo! —dijo Lydia, con una débil sonrisa; ¿era él consciente del hecho menor de lo mal que le había hecho sentir a ella esta mañana?

Pero con una rápida transición natural en ella, estaba dispuesta a halagarle si le dejaba, para que pudieran despedirse de alguna forma reconciliados. Se arriesgó a poner la mano en su hombro, y él no se apartó: ella le había metido el miedo en el cuerpo tan bien que a él no le sabían mal estas pruebas de sumisión restituida.

—Enciende un cigarro —dijo, suavemente, sacando la caja del bolsillo de él y abriéndola.

Entre tales mimosos signos de mutuo temor se despidieron. La sensación con la que se quedó Grandcourt era de control imperfecto.

Capítulo 31

> Abandonarse temerariamente
> a mares inexplorados, a riberas desconocidas.
>
> SHAKESPEARE[131]

EL DÍA QUE GWENDOLEN HARLETH SE CASÓ Y PASÓ A SER LA SEÑORA GRANDCOURT, la mañana era clara y brillante, y mientras el sol aún estaba bajo, una ligera escarcha cubría las hojas. La ceremonia nupcial era digna de verse, y medio Pennicote fue a verla, todos en procesión hacia la iglesia. Un viejo amigo del Rector ofició la ceremonia matrimonial, haciendo el Rector mismo de padre de la novia, para satisfacción de la procesión. Solo dos rostros, se observaba, mostraban signos de tristeza: el de la señora Davilow y el de Anna. Los párpados delicados de la madre estaban rosados, como si hubiera estado llorando la mitad de la noche; y a nadie le sorprendía que, por muy espléndida que fuera la unión, sintiera la partida de una chica que era la flor de sus hijas y de su propia vida. Se entendía menos por qué estaba a disgusto Anna cuando le sentaba tan bien el vestido de dama de honor. Todos los demás parecían reflejar el esplendor de la ocasión, la novia por encima de todos. Estaban todos de acuerdo que por lo que respectaba a su figura y su carruaje era digna de ser una «dama de la nobleza»; en cuanto al rostro, quizás se pensase que un título requería un color más rosado; pero al no tener precisamente el novio una tez coloreada —siendo, como la mujer del molinero observó, de complexión muy parecida a la de su marido—, el enlace era de lo más completo. En cualquier caso, él debía estar muy apegado a ella; y se esperaba que no tuviera nunca que echarle en cara que la había rescatado de servir como institutriz y a su madre de vivir en la cabaña de Sawyer, vicisitudes de las que se había hablado mucho en el pueblo. La hija del molinero, de catorce años, no podía creer que los señores de alta cuna se comportaran mal con sus mujeres, pero su madre la instruyó:

—Oh, niña, los hombres son hombres: benignos o simples, son parecidos unos a otros. Oí a mi madre decir que el escudero Pelton solía entrar con sus perros y un gran látigo en la habitación de su mujer, y los apaleaba allí para asustarla; y mi madre era la sirviente de la señora allí por esa época.

—Esa es una conversación desafortunada para una boda, señora Girdle —dijo el sastre—. Una pelea puede acabar con el látigo, pero empieza con la lengua, y son las mujeres las que tienen más de eso.

—El Señor se la dio para que las usaran, me imagino —dijo la señora Girdle—; Él nunca pretendió que las cosas se hicieran a la manera de ustedes.

—Por lo que sé del mozo que cuida de los caballos en Offendene —dijo el sastre—, este señor Grandcourt tiene la lengua corta. Todo debe hacerse bastante mal si no lo manda él.

—Entonces supongo que será él quien llevará el látigo —dijo la señora Girdle—. Ella tiene bastante lengua, lo puedo garantizar. ¡Mire, por allí vienen juntos!

—¡Qué ángulos más hermosos forman sus ojos! —dijo el sastre—. Hace que te sientas gracioso cuando te mira.

Gwendolen, de hecho, nunca mostró más elasticidad en su porte, más lustre en su profunda mirada oscura: tenía la brillantez de una fuerte exaltación, que a menudo proviene incluso de la pena. No era pena, no obstante, lo que sentía; había logrado recuperar de nuevo la misma condición que había disfrutado en la mesa de juego cuando Deronda la estaba observando, y empezó a perder. Estaba gozando de ello: cualquier ansiedad creada por su conciencia había sido tratada como un achaque, enterrada entre la vanidad ambiciosa y su deseo por el lujo, para los que haría falta una gran cantidad de veneno para erradicarlos. Esta mañana no podía haber dicho en verdad que se arrepintiera de haber aceptado a Grandcourt, o que algún vago temor por el futuro fuera a impedir los deslumbrantes efectos de la escena actual en la que ella representaba el papel principal. Que estaba haciendo algo mal, que podía sobrevenirle un castigo, que la mujer a la que había hecho una promesa y que había roto se lo estaba reprochando amargamente llena de pena, que Deronda con su manera de mirar las cosas muy probablemente la despreciaba por casarse con Grandcourt, como la había despreciado por apostar, y sobre todo, que la cuerda que la unía con este pretendiente y que hasta ahora había mantenido con su mano, se la estaban arrojando al cuello, todo este enredo abultado de hechos oscuros con vagas pero profundas impresiones, y con imágenes medio reales, medio fantásticas, la había estado preocupando durante las semanas de su compromiso. ¿Se había anulado esta mañana esa sensación perturbadora? No: la había apartado y superado con una especie de desafío exultante sintiéndose como si participase del juego de la vida, con muchos ojos sobre ella, apostándolo todo por ganar —o incluso si

perdía, que fuera de forma explosiva y con una sensación de importancia—. Pero esta mañana no la presionaba el miedo de perder su destino: creía que se le abrían las puertas de un poder más pleno para manejar las circunstancias, con toda la fuerza oficial del matrimonio, del que algunas mujeres hacían un uso tan pobre. Esa intoxicación de egoísmo juvenil, por la que la habían azorado los problemas, la humillación y una nueva sensación de culpabilidad, había vuelto bajo la nueva fuerza alimentada por los viejos humos. No presentaba en absoluto la imagen de la novia llorosa y trémula. La pobre Gwendolen, a la que algunos habían sobrevalorado en la instrucción de los caminos del mundo, con su cabeza erguida y su paso elástico, caminaba entre ilusiones; pero aún así, incluso, de forma subconsciente sabía que estaba un poco intoxicada.

—¡Gracias a Dios que lo llevas tan bien, querida! —dijo la señora Davilow, al ayudar a Gwendolen a desvestirse de su vestido nupcial y ponerse su traje de viaje. La única que había estado temblando había sido la pobre madre y su agitación obligó a Gwendolen doblemente a tomarse la mañana como si se tratara de un triunfo.

—¡Cómo! Habrías dicho lo mismo si hubiera ido a casa de la señora Mompert, querida, triste e incorregible mamá —dijo Gwendolen poniendo las manos sobre las mejillas de su madre con una tierna sonrisa; luego, retirándose un poco estiró un poco los brazos como si se exhibiera—. ¡Aquí estoy… la señora Grandcourt! ¿Qué más quieres de mí, además de lo que estoy segura de ser? Sabes que te morías de preocupación cuando pensabas que no sería la señora Grandcourt.

—¡Calla, calla, hija, por el amor de Dios! —dijo la señora Davilow, casi en un susurro. ¿Cómo puedo evitar sentirlo cuando me voy a separar de ti? Pero lo puedo llevar con alegría si tú estás feliz.

—¡Con alegría, no, mamá! —dijo Gwendolen, sacudiendo la cabeza, con una ligera sonrisa—. Lo llevarás de buena gana, pero siempre con pena. Todo lo haces con pena, no puedes abordar nada sin ella. —Y agarrando a su madre por los hombros, le llenó de besos primero una mejilla y luego la otra antes de decir muy contenta—: Y te apenarás de que todo esté a mi disposición, y que disfrute de todo a lo grande, con espléndidas casas, y caballos, y diamantes… tendré diamantes… y yendo a la corte, y siendo la señora Seguro-que-sí, o la señora Tal-vez, y que si gran señora por aquí, de galope por allí, y siempre queriéndote a ti más que a nadie más en el mundo.

—¡Mi dulce niña! Pero yo no estaré celosa si quieres más a tu marido; y él esperará ser el primero.

Gwendolen contrajo sus labios y su barbilla en una mueca graciosa, diciendo:

—Una expectativa más bien ridícula. Sin embargo, no pretendo tratarle mal, aunque se lo merezca.

Entonces, las dos se fundieron en un abrazo, y Gwendolen no pudo reprimir un sollozo al decir:

—Ojalá vinieras conmigo, mamá.

Pero el ligero brillo húmedo de sus ojos la hizo aún más encantadora al dar su mano a Grandcourt para que la condujera hacia el carruaje.

El Rector la miró dentro del carro para despedirse:

—Adiós; que Dios te bendiga; te veremos pronto de nuevo —y luego volvió con la señora Davilow diciéndole en un tono mitad festivo, mitad solmene:

—Estemos agradecidos, Fanny. Está en una posición muy adecuada para ella, más allá de lo que me habría atrevido esperar. Y pocas mujeres podían haber sido elegidas tan por sí mismas. Deberías sentirte una madre feliz.

Hubo un viaje en tren de unas cincuenta millas antes de que los nuevos esposos llegaran a la estación cercana a Ryelands. El cielo se había encapotado desde la mañana, y apenas acababa de pasar el crepúsculo cuando entraron por las puertas del jardín, pero Gwendolen, mirando por las ventanas del carruaje mientras proseguían rápidamente, todavía podía ver el gran contorno y las bellezas más cercanas de la escena: el largo camino sinuoso limitado por árboles de hoja perenne con grandes troncos grises; luego, la apertura a amplios espacios de césped y a ondulaciones cubiertas de matas oscuras; hasta que al final llegaron a un amplio nivel desde el cual podía verse la casa blanca, con un bosque que parecía colgar de la parte trasera, y la barandilla que subía y bajaba de una terraza situada enfrente.

Gwendolen había estado de su mejor humor durante el viaje, sin dejar de hablar, ignorando cualquier cambio en su posición mutua desde el día anterior; y Grandcourt había permanecido prácticamente inalterable cuando ella le devolvió su dócil ataque: él había cogido su mano y ella le agarró con su otra mano quedando sus dos manos entre las de él, animándose cada vez más, como un gatito que no se está quieto para que lo mimen. Había incluso

algo de febril en su excitación; y ahora, mientras atravesaba el parque, su susceptibilidad habitual a los cambios de luz y de escenario posibilitó que su corazón palpitara de una nueva forma. ¿Era simplemente por la novedad, o por la casi increíble realización de sus sueños infantiles de ser «alguien», caminando por sus propios largos pasillos y bajo sus propios techos de una eminencia magnífica, donde la Primavera aparecía pintada despojándose de flores, y los Céfiros[132] cortados de medio cuerpo hacían sonar sus trompetas sobre ella, mientras sus propios sirvientes, hombres vestidos de lacayos pero hombres de verdad, que no eran nada en su presencia, reverenciaban las buenas costumbres de su insolencia hacia ellos; en pocas palabras, siendo la heroína de una obra admirada sin sufrir las penas que requiere el arte? ¿Era solo la consecución de este objetivo lo que hacía palpitar su corazón? ¿O es que preveía algo oscuro, la insistente agudeza de la experiencia reprimida, mezclando las expectativas de un triunfo con el miedo al fracaso? La suya era una de esas naturalezas en las que la exultación lleva consigo una dosis de terror presta a cuajarse y declararse en cualquier momento.

Se contuvo y permaneció en silencio mientras se acercaban a las puertas, y cuando su marido dijo: «¡Ya estamos en casa!» y por primera vez la besó en los labios, ella apenas se dio cuenta: no era más que la aceptación pasiva de un saludo en medio de un espectáculo absorbente. ¿No era acaso toda su vida apresurada de los últimos tres meses un espectáculo, en el que su consciencia era un espectador asombrado? Tras la emoción medio premeditada del día, le sobrevino un entumecimiento.

Pero había una luz brillante en el recibidor: calor, esteras, alfombras, retratos de cuerpo entero, esculturas del Olimpo y sirvientes diligentes. Pero no muchos sirvientes, de todas formas: solo se habían añadido unos pocos más de Diplow a los que estaban normalmente al cargo de la casa; y la nueva criada de Gwendolen, que había venido con ella, había sido recomendada por la ama de llaves. Gwendolen se sintió conducida por Grandcourt a través de un pasillo ligeramente perfumado, luego por una antesala donde vio una puerta abierta que despedía un rico destello de luz y color.

—Estos son nuestros aposentos —dijo Grandcourt—. Imagino que querrás descansar un poco aquí hasta la hora de la cena. Cenaremos pronto.

Estrechó su mano contra sus labios y se alejó, más enamorado de lo que había esperado estar.

Gwendolen, deshaciéndose de su sombrero y su abrigo, se dejó caer en una silla cerca de la chimenea que chispeaba, y vio su imagen repetida en

espejos confrontados rodeada de un ambiente verde pálido y satinado. El ama de llaves había entrado en el tocador desde la habitación contigua dispuesta a demorarse, pensó Gwendolen, para observar a la nueva señora de Ryelands, quien sin embargo, deseando con impaciencia estar a solas, le dijo:

—¿Le dirá a Hudson que cuando haya sacado mi vestido deje todo lo demás? No quiero que vuelva, a menos que la llame.

El ama de llaves, acercándose, dijo:

—Aquí tiene un paquete, señora, que se me ordenó no entregar más que a usted, cuando estuviera sola. La persona que lo trajo dijo que era un regalo pedido en especial por el señor Grandcourt; pero él no sabría cuándo llegaría hasta que no viera que usted lo llevara. Perdóneme, señora; creí conveniente obedecer las órdenes.

Gwendolen cogió el paquete y lo dejó en su falda hasta que oyó cerrarse la puerta. Le vino a la mente que el paquete podría contener los diamantes que Grandcourt había comentado que estaban depositados en cierto lugar y que le serían entregados al casarse. En este momento de sentimientos confusos y de languidez progresivamente suntuosa, le agradaba esta diversión, estaba contenta de poder probarse los diamantes.

Dentro del envoltorio había una caja, pero dentro de la caja había un joyero; y ahora ya no tenía ninguna duda de que tenía los diamantes. Pero al abrir el joyero, al mismo tiempo que vio su brillo vio una carta sobre ellos. Conocía la escritura de la dirección. Era como si una víbora hubiera pasado sobre ellos. Su corazón dio un vuelco que pareció llevarse toda su fuerza; y mientras abría el trocito de papel, le temblaban las manos. Pero era legible como si estuviera impreso, y sus palabras se abalanzaron sobre ella.

> Estos diamantes, que una vez fueron entregados con amor ardiente a Lydia Glasher, se los entrega ella ahora a usted. Ha roto usted su palabra: que no poseería lo que era de ella. Tal vez piense que será feliz, como lo fue ella una vez, y que tendrá hijos preciosos como los de ella, que han de ser dejados a un lado. Dios es demasiado justo para ello. El hombre con el que se ha casado tiene un corazón marchito. Su mejor amor de juventud fue para mí; no podría usted arrebatarme eso aunque se quede con el resto. Está muerto; yo soy la tumba donde está enterrada su oportunidad de felicidad, así como la mía. Se le avisó. Y escogió injuriarme a mí y a mis hijos. Pretendía casarse conmigo. Se habría casado conmigo al fin si usted no hubiera roto su palabra. Tendrá usted su castigo. Lo deseo con toda mi alma.
>
> ¿Le dará esta carta a él para ponerlo en mi contra y arruinarnos más, a mí y a mis hijos? ¿Le gustará estar delante de su marido con los diamantes puestos, y mis palabras en el pensamiento tanto de él como de usted? ¿Pensará él que tiene usted motivos para quejarse por haberla hecho miserable? Le aceptó usted sabiéndolo todo. El deliberado mal que me ha hecho será su maldición.

Al principio Gwendolen quedó boquiabierta leyendo una y otra vez las horribles palabras de la carta como si estuviera predestinada a una condena; pero de repente un nuevo espasmo de terror la hizo inclinarse hacia delante y extender el papel hacia el fuego, para que ningún ojo fuese testigo de la acusación ni de la prueba. Voló como una pluma desde sus dedos temblorosos y cayó en medio de las grandes llamas. En su movimiento, la cesta cayó al suelo y los diamantes rodaron. No hizo caso de ello, y se reclinó de nuevo en su silla, desvalida. No podía ya ver sus propios reflejos: eran como esas mujeres petrificadas de color blanco; pero alguien que se hubiera acercado a ella habría notado el temblor de sus labios y sus manos. Estuvo sentada así un buen tiempo, siendo consciente de poco más de que se iba encontrando cada vez peor, y que esas palabras escritas no dejaban de repetirse en su interior.

En verdad que estas joyas estaban envenenadas, y el veneno había entrado en esta pobre criatura.

Al fin, hubo un golpe en la puerta y Grandcourt entró, vestido para cenar. Su visión le provocó un nuevo estado nervioso, y Gwendolen se puso a gritar con violencia histérica. Él había esperado verla vestida y sonriendo, preparada para bajar. En cambio, la vio pálida, temblando al parecer de terror, con las joyas desparramadas a su lado por el suelo. ¿Era un ataque de locura?

De alguna forma u otra las Furias[133] habían cruzado su umbral.

Capítulo 32

> En todas las épocas se han preferido los textos en los que un amor poderoso tenga la naturaleza de una fatalidad aislada, donde queden fuera las opiniones y determinaciones habituales: así por ejemplo, el frenesí de Dafnis[134], al que le hubiera valido poco conocer la doctrina de Heráclito[135]; o la pasión de Tristán, alimentada mediante un brebaje, y que aunque hubiera sido tan reflexivo como Duns Scoto[136], la copa le habría trastornado igualmente el juicio; o Romeo al abordar de repente a Julieta, que aunque hubiera tenido alguna objeción contra Ptolomeo[137] no habría variado su discurso bajo el balcón. Pero no todo el amor es así, incluso aunque sea poderoso; no, esta pasión tiene un rango de posibilidades tan amplio como para aliarse con cada operación del alma; de esta forma reconocerá un efecto proveniente de la luz imaginada de firmamentos desconocidos, y tendrá su escala dispuesta en las órbitas mayores de lo que ha sucedido y sucederá.

DERONDA, A SU REGRESO A LA CIUDAD, PUDO ASEGURAR A SIR HUGO DE HABER dejado claro a Grandcourt que podía obtener cincuenta mil libras abandonando una expectativa que probablemente era lejana, y no del todo segura; pero no había obtenido más signos de la disposición de Grandcourt sobre el asunto que el hecho de que se mostrara evidentemente dispuesto a mantener comunicaciones amistosas.

—¿Y qué pensaste de la futura esposa al verla más de cerca? —dijo Sir Hugo.

—Pensé mejor de ella de lo que lo hice en Leubronn. La ruleta no era un buen sitio para ella; hizo que aflorara algo de su demonio. En Diplow parecía mucho más femenina y atractiva, menos dura y dueña de sí misma. Pensé que su boca y sus ojos tenían una expresión bastante diferente.

—No coquetees demasiado con ella, Dan —dijo Sir Hugo, bromeando—. Si haces enfadar a Grandcourt cuando vengan a la Abadía en Navidad, eso interferirá con mis negocios.

—Puedo quedarme en la ciudad, señor.

—No, no. Lady Mallinger y las chicas no pueden pasar sin ti en Navidad. Solo que no metas la pata, a menos que consigas que te rete a duelo, y que te las apañes para disparar a Grandcourt, que bien puede valer la pena cierta incomodidad.

—No creo que me viera usted coquetear nunca —dijo Deronda muy seriamente.

—¿Ah no? —dijo Sir Hugo, provocativamente—. Siempre estás mirando a las mujeres con ternura, y hablando con ellas de una forma jesuítica. Eres un joven peligroso, una especie de Lovelace[138] que haces que las Clarisas corran tras de ti en vez de tú tras ellas.

¿De qué servía exasperarse por un chiste sin gracia? Solo que la exasperación venía antes de la reflexión sobre su utilidad. Pocas observaciones amistosas son más molestas que las que nos dicen que siempre parece que hacemos lo que nunca pretendimos hacer. La idea de Sir Hugo acerca del coqueteo, como era de esperar, era más bien peculiar; por su parte, Deronda estaba seguro de no haber coqueteado nunca. Pero estaba contento de que el baronet no tuviera conocimiento del rescate del collar de Gwendolen para alimentar su gusto por este tipo de declaraciones.

Estaría en guardia en el futuro; por ejemplo, en su conducta hacia la señora Meyrick, a la que iba a hacer su primera visita desde su llegada de Leubronn. Pues Mirah era en verdad una criatura a la que era difícil no mostrar un tierno interés ya fuera por la mirada como por la conversación.

La señora Meyrick no había dejado de enviar a Deronda un parte con el bienestar de Mirah en su familia. «Cada día la queremos más», había escrito. «A la hora del desayuno, todas miramos hacia la puerta con expectación para verla entrar; y la observamos y escuchamos como si fuera una nativa de un país nuevo. No he oído una palabra de sus labios que me haga dudar de ella. Está muy satisfecha y llena de gratitud. Mis hijas están aprendiendo mucho de ella, y esperan conseguir más alumnas; pues está ansiosa de ganarse el pan sin holgazanear, sino trabajando, como mis hijas. Mab dice que nuestra vida se ha transformado como en un cuento de hadas, y todo lo que teme es que Mirah se convierta de nuevo en un ruiseñor y vuele lejos de nosotras. Su voz es perfecta: ni alta ni fuerte, sino minuciosa y emotiva, como los pensamientos de lo que ha sucedido. Así es como pensamos que es una voz hermosa la gente mayor como yo».

Pero la señora Meyrick no entró en detalles que le hubieran obligado a decir que Amy y Mab, que habían acompañado a Mirah a la sinagoga, encontraron la fe judía menos reconciliable con sus deseos en su caso que en el de la Rebeca[139] de Scott. Lo mantenían en silencio por delicadeza hacia Mirah, para quien su religión era un asunto demasiado sensible como para tratarlo a la ligera; pero tras un tiempo, Amy, que tenía mucho de reformadora práctica, no pudo reprimir una cuestión.

—Perdona, Mirah, pero ¿te parece del todo correcto que las mujeres se tengan que sentar entre rejas en una galería aparte?

—Sí, nunca pensé que pudiera ser de otra forma —dijo Mirah, apaciblemente sorprendida.

—¿Y prefieres ver a los hombres con sus sombreros puestos? —dijo Mab, proponiendo cautelosamente una pequeña diferencia.

—Oh, sí. Me gusta lo que siempre he visto allí, porque me trae de nuevo los mismos sentimientos, los sentimientos de los que no me desprendería por nada del mundo.

Tras esto, cualquier otra crítica, fuera de doctrina o de práctica, les habría parecido a esta generosa pequeña familia una crueldad inhóspita. La religión de Mirah y sus afectos iban del todo unidos, y nunca se le había presentado como un conjunto de proposiciones.

—Se dice a sí misma que es muy mala judía, y no sabe ni la mitad de la religión de su pueblo —dijo Amy, cuando Mirah se hubo acostado—. Tal vez se vaya desprendiendo de ella gradualmente y se pase al cristianismo como el resto del mundo, si nos quisiera mucho y nunca encontrara a su madre. Es tan extraño ser de religión judía hoy en día.

—¡Oh, oh, oh! —se lamentó Mab—. Ojalá no fuera tan mala cristiana. ¿Cómo puede una cristiana tan horrible, que siempre se está escaqueando del trabajo, convertir a una judía que no tiene ninguna falta?

—Puede que sea muy malvada por mi parte —dijo la astuta Kate—, pero no puedo evitar desear que no se encuentre a su madre. Puede que haya algo desagradable.

—Yo no pienso así, querida —dijo la señora Meyrick—. Creo que Mirah está hecha del mismo molde que su madre. ¡Y qué alegría sería para ella recuperar una hija como ella! Pero los sentimientos de una madre no son dignos de consideración, supongo —lanzó una mirada maliciosa a sus propias hijas—, y una madre muerta vale más que una viva.

—Bueno, puede que sí, mamaíta —dijo Kate—; pero preferiríamos tenerte en poco y que estés viva.

No solo las Meyrick, cuyos conocimientos diversos habían sido adquiridos por ese indagar irregular al que normalmente se ven reducidas las chicas inteligentes, sino el mismo Deronda también, con toda su instrucción masculina, se habían dado cuenta con la aparición de Mirah, que apenas sabían nada del judaísmo moderno o de la historia interna judía. El Pueblo Elegido había sido tratado en general como un pueblo elegido por el bien de

otros; se consideraba su pensamiento como algo (sin importar exactamente qué) que tenía que haber sido completamente diferente; y Deronda, como sus semejantes, había considerado el judaísmo como una especie de forma excéntrica y fosilizada, que un hombre letrado podía prescindir de estudiar, y dejarlo a los especialistas. Pero Mirah, con su escapada despavorida de uno de sus padres, y la búsqueda ansiosa del otro, había hecho descubrir a Deronda la hasta entonces escondida realidad de que el judaísmo era algo que todavía latía en algunas vidas humanas y que resultaba para ellos la única religión posible; y durante el siguiente viaje de placer que hizo con Sir Hugo empezó a mirar el exterior de las sinagogas, y los títulos de los libros acerca de los judíos. Este despertar en un nuevo interés —este paso de la suposición de que tenemos la opinión correcta sobre un tema que no nos importa, a una repentina fascinación por el mismo, y la sensación de que nuestras opiniones no eran sino ignorancia—, es un remedio efectivo contra el aburrimiento, que desgraciadamente no puede ser recetado por los médicos; pero Deronda lo había aplicado, y había sobrellevado tanto mejor sus semanas de descanso. Fue durante este viaje que entró por primera vez en una sinagoga judía, en Frankfurt, donde sus compañeros de viaje se habían parado a descansar un viernes. Al explorar la calle de los judíos, que ya había visto hacía mucho tiempo, recordaba muy bien sus viejas casas pintorescas; en lo que ahora se fijaban sus ojos era en los seres humanos que había allí; y su pensamiento, ocupado en conectarlos con etapas pasadas de su raza, removió esa fibra de compasión histórica que había ayudado a definir en él ciertos rasgos que vale la pena mencionar para aquellos que estén interesados en su futuro. Es cierto que cuando un joven tiene una figura elegante, modales no excéntricos, la educación de un caballero, y unos ingresos considerables, no es habitual sentir una curiosidad morbosa sobre su manera de pensar, o sus gustos peculiares. Puede estar muy bien situado en la vida como un hombre joven agradable e inteligente sin que se le examine especialmente. Luego, a medida que va descuidando su aspecto, se notan mucho más sus peculiaridades, y solo por compasión no se juzgan como altamente objetables. Pero cualquiera que quiera entender los efectos de los sucesos posteriores sobre Deronda debe conocer lo que era a los veinticinco años, y conocerlo más a fondo que lo que podría revelar un trato ordinario.

Sucedía que la misma viveza de sus impresiones le había hecho aparecer ante sus amigos de forma muy enigmática, y había contribuido a una aparente imprecisión de sus sentimientos. Su sensibilidad y reflexividad precoz le

habían llevado a una compasión hacia todos, que amenazaba impedirle tomar las medidas más adecuadas en cada caso: tan pronto como asumía cualquier antagonismo, aunque solo fuera de pensamiento, se veía a sí mismo, como un guerrero sabino[140] en la memorable historia, donde su lanza no se encontraba más que con carne de su carne y con las cosas que amaba. Había desarrollado tanto el hábito de ver las cosas como probablemente aparecían a los otros, que decantarse por un lado, a menos que fuera una opresión evidente, le resultaba deshonesto. Su abundante y adaptable compasión había terminado por fundirse con ese análisis reflexivo que tiende a neutralizarla. Pocos hombres eran capaces de mantenerse tan libres del vicio como él; y aún así, odiaba los vicios de forma templada, pues estaba acostumbrado a verlos no tanto en abstracto como mezclados con cada naturaleza humana, cada una de ellas con su historia individual, lo que hacía que se doblegara a la comprensión y a la conmiseración. Con el mismo equilibrio innato, era fervientemente democrático en su sentimiento por la multitud, pero también, por su afectuosidad e imaginación, intensamente conservador; ávido de especulaciones sobre el gobierno y la religión, pero en contra de desprenderse de formas largamente aprobadas por la experiencia, que para él, estaba llenas de recuerdos y sentimientos que ningún argumento podía anular. Lo normal es caer hacia el lado por el que nos inclinamos; y Deronda sospechaba que se inclinaba demasiado por las causas perdidas del mundo. El martirio cambia de lado, y se hallaba en peligro de cambiar con él, al sentir gran repugnancia a aceptar el éxito que el orden del mundo nos impone traicionando el bienestar común. Pero el miedo a caer en un odio estrecho e irracional le hizo pararse a pensar: excusaba a los herederos de los privilegios; y aborrecía la amargura de los perdedores y el tono acusador de los innovadores inaceptados. Una compasión demasiado reflexiva y generalizada corría el peligro de paralizar en él esa indignación contra lo malo y esa calidad de compañerismo que son las condiciones de la fuerza moral; y en los últimos años, en los que ya había madurado, se había dado tan vivamente cuenta de esto que lo que más anhelaba era un signo externo, o una iluminación interna, que le colocara en una línea definitiva de acción, y canalizara su energía dispersa. Estaba dejando de importarle el conocimiento, no tenía ambición por la práctica, a menos que ambas pudieran ser encauzadas en una sola corriente con sus emociones; y estaba aterrorizado, como si fuera la morada de las almas perdidas, ante esa anatomía muerta de la cultura que convierte el universo en una mera respuesta sin fin a las preguntas, y que sabe, no todo, sino todo lo

demás sobre todo, como alguien que no conociera nada del olor de las violetas salvo el olor mismo dado a conocer por alguien sin olfato. ¿Pero cómo y de dónde vendría ese signo necesario, la influencia que justificara la parcialidad, y le convirtiera en lo que anhelaba ser pero que no podía ser por sí mismo —una parte orgánica de la vida social—, en lugar de vagar por ella como un espíritu añorante separado del cuerpo, conmovido por una imprecisa pasión social, pero sin un objetivo fijo en el que hacer real el compañerismo? No quería vivir sin marcar esa diferencia que apuntara hacia lo más bueno; ¿pero cómo conseguirlo? Una cosa es ver el camino; otra cosa es tomarlo. Encontró que parte de la culpa se debía a su nacimiento y el modo en que fue educado, que no le había supuesto ninguna exigencia especial ni le había conectado con ninguna relación fija salvo una de tipo dudoso; pero no pretendía ocultarse a sí mismo en una especie de aturdimiento meditativo, y poco a poco se iba alejando de esa vida de sentimiento llena de energía que habría proclamado (si se hubiera sentido con ganas de proclamar algo) ser la mejor de todas las vidas, y para él la única que merecía la pena vivir. Buscaba alguna forma de mantener intactas y potentes la emoción y su generación de sentimientos —lo que hace la vida atractiva— ante la reflexividad que amenazaba anular todas las diferencias. Reducir los objetos del sentimiento a polvo fino, pero mantenerlo vivo y activo, era algo así como la famosa fórmula para hacer cañones: formar un hueco cilíndrico y rodearlo con acero intentando mantener en todo momento el hueco cilíndrico. ¿Pero cómo distinguir lo que nuestra voluntad puede sabiamente preservar en su plenitud amontonando momias de gatos y atendiendo al costoso culto de enclaustradas inmundicias?

Algo así pasaba por la mente de Deronda cuando leía leyes o cuando escuchaba sin mucha atención una conversación refinada. Mientras tanto, seguía sin emprender ninguna acción en particular con entusiasmo y determinación. No es que fuese necesario proponer una experiencia admirable como ideal, pero al menos sí un esfuerzo constante y diario como el que muchos jóvenes desde los patriarcas habían tenido que pasar, con dificultades y tropiezos.

Ya he dicho que bajo su calma externa poseía un fervor que le predisponía a sentir la presencia de la poesía en los sucesos de cada día; y las formas de la calle de los judíos, fomentando la sensación de unión con lo remoto, le animaron a meditar sobre dos elementos de nuestra vida histórica, que esa sensación eleva a la misma región de la poesía: el débil comienzo de la fe y

de las instituciones y lo mucho que tardan en desmoronarse; el polvo y los restos marchitos del pasado con los que van a ser cubiertos, permitiendo solo a las mentes despiertas admirar o bien una vida sublime, como ocurre con las dos hojas pequeñas que acabarán convirtiéndose en un gran árbol, o bien la herencia conmovedora en la que toda la gloria y la grandeza se han convertido en un triste recuerdo.

Esta apasionada meditación, mientras salía de la calle de los judíos y continuaba deambulando por la cálida noche, pretendiendo hallar el camino hacia la sinagoga, neutralizó el efecto repulsivo de ciertos pequeños incidentes desagradables con los que topó en su camino. Al entrar en una vieja librería para preguntar por la hora exacta del servicio en la sinagoga, le atendió cordialmente un joven judío, que le aconsejó no ir al nuevo edificio de la Reforma, sino a la vieja escuela Rabínica de la ortodoxia; y luego le embaucó como un puro teutón[141], con más entusiasmo, para que encargara el pedido de un libro «*nicht so leit zu bekommen*»[142]. Mientras tanto, en el mostrador opuesto, un vendedor sordo y truculento lanzaba una mirada dura a ciertas cartas, que aparentemente combinaban las ventajas de los negocios con la religión, y se las propuso a grandes voces en dialecto judío a otro hombre de aspecto sórdido vestido con una larga gabardina que le llegaba hasta los tobillos, con una bolsa en la mano y un ancho sombrero bajo que sobrepasaba la extensión de su nariz, y tan pronto hubo desaparecido se presentó otro hombre del mismo aspecto salido de un rincón sombrío de la tienda y fue interpelado también a gritos en el mismo dialecto. De hecho, Deronda observó a varios Israelitas de mirada extraña, ninguno de ellos carente de malas artes, bien diferenciables de los cristianos de mirada extraña de la misma mezcla de moral. En su preocupación por los familiares de Mirah, había estado pensando recientemente en los judíos corrientes con una especie de aprensión personal. Pero hacer un ejercicio de comparación a menudo reduce nuestra sorpresa y rechazo por las aberraciones de los judíos y de otros disidentes cuyas vidas no ofrecen un modelo consistente o adorable de su credo, y esta noche, Deronda, dándose cuenta de que estaba cayendo en la injusticia y en la exageración ridícula, comenzó a usar esa comparación correctiva: pagó más táleros[143] de la cuenta, sin prejuicio de su interés en el destino hebreo o su deseo de encontrar la *Rabbinische Schule*[144], a la que llegó al ocaso del día, y entró en ella con una buena congregación de hombres.

Dio la casualidad de que tomó un asiento alineado con un hombre mayor situado a la suficiente distancia como para irle lanzando miradas curiosas por su aspecto remarcable: sus ropas corrientes, así como el talit, muy usado, una especie de manto blanco con flecos azules que se lleva durante la oración; sin embargo, su amplia barba blanca y su viejo sombrero de fieltro enmarcaban un perfil de finos contornos que tanto podía ser italiano como hebreo. También él miraba de vez en cuando a Deronda, hasta que sus ojos se encontraron: una casualidad nada deseable con desconocidos, y una razón para Deronda para no mirar de nuevo; pero enseguida vio que le ofrecían un libro de oraciones abierto y tuvo que inclinarse para dar las gracias. Sin embargo, los talits blancos habían formado asamblea, el lector había subido al almimbar o púlpito, y comenzó la ceremonia. Deronda, que ya había mirado lo suficiente la traducción alemana del hebreo del libro que tenía ante él para saber que estaba oyendo principalmente Salmos y pasajes del Antiguo Testamento, se entregó al fuerte efecto de las liturgias cantadas que es independiente del significado verbal detallado —como el efecto de un *Miserere* de Allegri o un *Magnificat* de Palestrina—[145]. Lo que más conmueve en una liturgia es la oración que no busca nada en especial, sino que es un anhelo por escapar a las limitaciones de nuestra propia debilidad y una invocación a que el Bien entre y habite en nosotros; o incluso un ensalzamiento absorto en la felicidad, un *Gloria in excelsis* de que tal Bien existe; y tanto el anhelo como la exaltación reúnen su máxima fuerza procedente de la comunión en una forma que las ha expresado a ambas, durante generaciones de hombres luchadores. La liturgia hebrea, como otras, tiene sus transiciones de letanías, lírica, proclamaciones, oraciones áridas y bendición; pero esta noche todo era lo mismo para Deronda: el canto del Chazan[146] o el amplio espectro de voz del Lector, pasando de la monotonía a los gritos repentinos, el arranque de dulces voces de niños provenientes del pequeño coro, el balanceo devoto de los cuerpos de los hombres hacia delante y hacia atrás, la misma mediocridad del edificio y el aspecto mísero de la escena en la que la fe nacional, que había penetrado el pensamiento de medio mundo, y moldeado las espléndidas formas de la religión de ese mundo, encontraba un eco oscuro y remoto —todo se mezclaba para él como una expresión de una historia vinculante, trágica, y aún así gloriosa. Se maravilló por la fuerza de su propio sentimiento; parecía más que apropiado para la ocasión, como si fuera un influjo divino en la oscuridad, ante la cual se presentara una visión para ser interpretada. La escena entera era una tensión

coherente, su carga un lamento pasional, pero si hubiera escuchado la liturgia del Día de la Reconciliación, le habría causado el efecto contrario: «Feliz el ojo que vio estas cosas; pero, verdaderamente, solamente oír de ellas aflige nuestra alma. Feliz el ojo que vio nuestro templo y el gozo de nuestra congregación; pero, verdaderamente, solamente oír de ellos aflige nuestra alma. Feliz el ojo que vio los dedos siguiendo el ritmo de cada canción; pero, verdaderamente, solamente oír de ellos aflige nuestra alma».

Pero al finalizar los sonidos devotos y el movimiento de multitud de rostros indiferentes y figuras vulgares que había allí ante él, le vino la triste idea de que probablemente solo él había experimentado ese sentimiento, y que tal vez era la única persona en la congregación para quien el servicio había sido más que una pura rutina. Apenas tuvo tiempo de que este pensamiento negativo cruzara por su mente antes de inclinarse ante su compañero de liturgia y moverse hacia fuera con el resto, cuando sintió una mano en su brazo, y volviéndose con la desagradable sensación que estas demandas abruptas siempre producen, vio cerca de él el rostro de barba blanca de su compañero, que le dijo en alemán:

—Perdone, joven caballero, permítame preguntarle de qué familia procede, ¿cuál es el nombre de soltera de su madre?

Deronda experimentó una fuerte sensación de rebeldía: tenía ganas de sacarse de encima enseguida esa mano de su brazo; al final se las arregló para separarse y manifestar fríamente:

—Soy inglés.

El que hizo la pregunta lo miró dudosamente todavía por unos momentos, hasta que elevó su sombrero y se marchó —si con la sensación de haber cometido un error o bien de haber sido rechazado, Deronda no estaba muy seguro—. En su camino de regreso hacia el hotel trató de acallar cualquier inquietud sobre el tema reflexionando que no podía haber actuado de otro modo. ¿Cómo podía decir a esa persona totalmente extraña para él que no conocía el nombre de la familia de su madre? Ciertamente, se había tomado una libertad del todo irresponsable por la brusquedad de la pregunta, que se debía seguramente a cierto parecido fantástico como el que suele ocurrir a menudo sin que signifique nada. El incidente, se dijo, era trivial; pero aunque hubiera tenido importancia, había experimentado una sensación interna demasiado fuerte como para arrepentirse de haberle cortado. Era, además, una razón para no mencionar la sinagoga a los Mallinger —además de su tendencia a ocultar al baronet cualquier cosa que luego fuese calificada como

entusiasmo quijotesco—. No existía apenas ningún hombre más bondadoso que Sir Hugo; verdaderamente, en su amabilidad, especialmente hacia las mujeres, actuaba de forma que muchos considerarían romántica; pero él nunca consideraba romántica esta forma de actuar, y en general sonreía ante la introducción de grandes principios, o de razones que quedaban muy distantes. Este era el punto de mayor diferencia entre él y Deronda, el cual muy raramente tomaba su desayuno sin reflexionar en silencio sobre los motivos con los que debía ocupar ese día de acuerdo con la costumbre de sus contemporáneos.

Esta parada en Frankfurt fue hecha en su camino de regreso a casa, y sus vibrantes impresiones se mantuvieron tanto más en él por el deber que sentía de cuidar del bienestar de Mirah. Esa pregunta sobre su parentesco, que si no la hubiera rechazado como trivial tanto externa como internamente, habría aparecido más como una amenaza que como una promesa de revelación, y había reforzado su preocupación por el efecto que resultaría de encontrar a los familiares de Mirah, así como su determinación de proceder con cautela. Si realizaba un descubrimiento desagradable, ¿estaba obligado a manifestarlo y crearle más problemas a ella?

Había escrito a la señora Meyrick anunciando su visita a las cuatro de la tarde, y halló a Mirah sentada trabajando solamente con la señora Meyrick y Mab, el piano abierto, y toda la compañía de los gloriosos grabados. La delicada pulcritud de su cabello y su vestido, el destello de una felicidad apacible en un rostro en el que un pintor no habría necesitado cambiar nada si hubiese querido reflejarlo en un cuadro titulado «Paz en la tierra a los hombres de buena voluntad», contrastaba tanto con el recuerdo que tenía de la primera vez que la vio, que resultaba encantadora a los ojos de Deronda. También Mirah estaba pensando lo mismo, y justo después del saludo dijo:

—¡Mire qué diferente soy de la mísera criatura que encontró en el río! Todo porque me vio y me ofreció lo mejor.

—Fui yo quien tuvo suerte al encontrarla —dijo Deronda—. Cualquier otro hombre se habría sentido satisfecho de haber hecho lo que hice.

—No es así como hay que pensarlo —dijo Mirah, sacudiendo la cabeza con determinación—. Yo lo veo como realmente fue. Fue usted, y no otro, quien me encontró y fue buena conmigo.

—Estoy de acuerdo con Mirah —dijo la señora Meyrick—. San Fulano es un mal santo al que rezar.

—Además, ese otro Fulano no me habría llevado hasta usted —dijo Mirah, sonriendo a la señora Meyrick—. Y prefiero estar con usted que con cualquier otra persona del mundo salvo mi madre. Me pregunto si hubo alguna vez un pobre pajarito, perdido y sin saber volar, que fuera puesto en un nido caliente con una madre y unas hermanas que la trataran con más naturalidad, como si siempre hubiera estado allí. Casi nunca había llegado a pensar antes que pudiera sentirme en el mundo tan feliz y sin temores como ahora. —Pareció meditar un momento, y luego añadió—: A veces, tengo un poco de miedo.

—¿De qué tiene usted miedo? —dijo Deronda, preocupado.

—De que al doblar la esquina de una calle me encuentre a mi padre. Parece espantoso que pueda tener miedo de toparme con él. Es mi único sufrimiento —dijo Mirah, con voz lastimera.

—No es algo muy probable —dijo Deronda, deseando que todavía lo fuera menos; entonces, sin dejar escapar la oportunidad añadió—: ¿Sería ahora para usted una gran pena si no volviera a encontrar a su madre?

No respondió inmediatamente, sino que meditó de nuevo, con sus ojos fijos en la pared opuesta. Luego, los volvió hacia Deronda, y dijo con decisión, como si hubiera llegado a la verdad exacta:

—Quiero que ella sepa que siempre la he amado, y si está viva, quiero consolarla. Puede que esté muerta. Si lo estuviera, me gustaría saber dónde está enterrada; y saber si mi hermano vive para rezar el *Kadish*[147] en recuerdo de ella. Pero trataré de no afligirme. Durante muchos años he pensado que estaba muerta. La tendré en mi mente, como siempre la he tenido. Nada nos puede separar. Creo que nunca he pecado contra ella. He procurado hacer lo que no le habría hecho daño. Solo puede que esté disgustada por que yo no fuera una buena judía.

—¿De qué modo no es usted una buena judía? —dijo Deronda.

—Soy una ignorante, y nunca observábamos las leyes, si no que vivíamos entre cristianos como hacían ellos. Pero he oído a mi padre reírse del rigor de los judíos sobre las comidas y sus costumbres, y que no les gustan los cristianos. Creo que mi madre seguía la ley estrictamente; pero nunca pudo hacer que no quisiera a los que para mí son mejores que cualquier persona de mi pueblo que haya conocido. Creo que podía obedecerla en otras cosas, pero no en esto. Es mucho más fácil para mí compartir el amor que el odio. Recuerdo una obra de teatro que leí en alemán —desde que estoy aquí la tengo muy presente— en la que la heroína dice algo así.

—*Antígona*[148] —dijo Deronda.

—Ah, la conoce. Pero no creo que mi madre quisiera que no amara a mis mejores amigos. Ella estaría también agradecida. —Al decir esto, Mirah se había vuelto hacia la señora Meyrick, y con el semblante iluminado dijo—: ¡Oh, si alguna vez nos encontramos y llegamos a saber la una de la otra, de forma que pudiera contarle lo que sin duda la consolaría, me sentiría tan bendecida, mi alma no desearía otra cosa que seguir amándola!

—¡Que Dios te bendiga, hija! —dijo la señora Meyrick, con palabras que se les escaparon involuntariamente de su corazón maternal. Pero para descargar el exceso de sentimiento, miró a Deronda y dijo—: Es curioso que Mirah, que recuerda tan bien a su madre, como si la hubiera visto, no puede recordar nada de su hermano, salvo el alivio de haber sido llevado por él cuando estaba cansada, o que estaba cerca de ella cuando estaba en la falda de su madre. Debía ser que casi no estaba en casa. Ya era mayor. Es una lástima que su hermano debiera ser como una extraño para ella.

—Es bueno; estoy segura que Esdras es bueno —dijo Mirah, con ardor—. Quería a mi madre, solía cuidar de ella. Recuerdo más de él que eso. Recuerdo la voz de mi madre una vez llamándole: «¡Esdras!» y luego su respuesta a lo lejos: «¡Madre!». —Mirah había cambiado un poco su voz al pronunciar cada una de estas palabras, dándoles una entonación amorosa—. Y luego él se acercó a nosotras. Estoy segura de que es bueno. Siempre me he consolado pensando eso.

Era imposible responder a esto ni estando completamente de acuerdo ni dudando. La señora Meyrick y Deronda intercambiaron una rápida mirada: sobre el hermano ella sentía la misma dolorosa duda que sentía él. Pero Mirah continuó, absorta en sus recuerdos:

—¿No es maravilloso que recuerde las voces mejor que nada más? Creo que calan más profundo en nosotros que cualquier otra cosa. A menudo me he imaginado el cielo hecho de voces.

—Como tu canto, sí —dijo Mab, que hasta entonces había permanecido en respetuoso silencio, y cuando habló lo hizo tímidamente, como tenía por costumbre en presencia del Príncipe Camaralzamán—: Ma, pide a Mirah que cante. El señor Deronda no la ha oído.

—¿Le resultaría molesto cantar ahora? —dijo Deronda, con una caballerosidad más pronunciada de lo que hasta entonces había sido consciente.

—Oh, me encantaría —dijo Mirah—. Tras este período de descanso mi voz ha vuelto a ser la de antes.

Quizás su buen carácter era debido a algo más que la sencillez de su naturaleza. Las circunstancias de la vida la habían hecho considerar todo lo que le pedían como trabajo, sin que interviniera para nada el afecto; y había empezado su trabajo antes de tener uso de razón.

Se levantó inmediatamente y se dirigió al piano, un instrumento bastante gastado que, no obstante sus años, ante el contacto de sus pequeños dedos, produjo un buen sonido en la introducción a su melodía. Deronda se puso donde mejor podía verla mientras cantaba; y ella actuó de forma tan tranquila como si hubiera sido una niña que se dispusiera a desayunar.

Imaginadla —siempre es bueno imaginarse a una criatura humana en quien la hermosura corporal aparece tan en consonancia con la de su ser entero como la de esos asombrosos y transparentes universos de vida que encontramos en el mar—, imaginadla con su pelo oscuro peinado hacia atrás pero mostrando aún pequeños cabellos enrollados en forma de anillo en sus sienes, que astutamente habían hallado la forma de volver a su posición mientras el resto de la cabellera caía sobre su nuca formando rizos, que renacían de nuevo tras el alisado del baño como los juncos de un lago. Observad luego el perfecto camafeo que forma su perfil, tallado en una oscura coraza, donde por feliz fortuna, están clavadas en el lugar de sus ojos dos oscuras gemas; su delicada nariz, dispuesta a captar los más finos olores, la oreja perfecta, las definidas curvas del mentón y del cuello que conformaban una expresión delicada sin indicar debilidad.

Cantó «Per pietà non dirmi addio»[149] de Beethoven, con un patetismo tenue pero penetrante que llevaba en sí la esencia del canto perfecto, haciéndole a uno olvidarse del arte y fundiéndose con la canción. Era el tipo de voz que da la impresión de ser proferida como el cortejo de un pájaro para una audiencia cercana y querida. Al principio Deronda la miró, pero pronto tuvo que taparse los ojos con la mano, como si quisiera atrapar la melodía en la oscuridad; luego se dio cuenta que su actitud podría parecer una rareza, y volvió a encontrarse con la mirada de muda fascinación que ella le dirigió al final.

—Creo que nunca he disfrutado tanto de una canción como esa —dijo gratamente.

—¿Le gusta cómo canto? Mi voz hace muy feliz —dijo ella, con una sonrisa complacida—. Me ha dado muchos disgustos, porque me falló cuando

la necesitaba. Pero ahora puedo usarla para ganarme el pan. Se me ha enseñado bien. Y ahora tengo dos alumnas, que la señorita Meyrick me ha ayudado a encontrar. Me pagan casi dos coronas por sus dos lecciones.

—Creo que conozco a algunas señoras que le encontrarían muchas alumnas después de Navidad —dijo Deronda—. ¿No le importaría cantar ante cualquiera que deseara oírla?

—Oh no, querría hacer algo para conseguir dinero. La señora Meyrick piensa que puedo enseñar a leer y a hablar. Pero será difícil si nadie quiere aprender de mí. —Mirah sonrió alborozada, de una forma que no había hecho hasta entonces—. Diría que la encontraré pobre, me refiero a mi madre. Me gustaría conseguirle dinero. Y no puedo vivir siempre de la caridad —y dirigiendo la mirada a sus tres compañeras a la vez, añadió— aunque es la caridad más dulce del mundo.

—Tengo la impresión de que usted puede hacerse rica —dijo Deronda, sonriendo—. Hay grandes señoras a las que tal vez les gustaría que enseñara a sus hijas. Ya lo veremos. Pero ahora cante de nuevo para nosotros.

Volvió a cantar gustosamente, obras que sabía de memoria de Gordigiani y Schubert; luego, cuando dejó el piano, Mab le imploró:

—Oh Mirah, ¿no te importaría cantar el himno?

—Es muy infantil —dijo Mirah—. Es como susurrar.

—¿Qué es el himno? —preguntó Deronda.

—Es el himno hebreo que recuerda que le cantaba su madre cuando estaba en la cama —dijo la señora Meyrick.

—Me gustaría mucho oírlo —dijo Deronda—, si cree que soy digno de oír lo que es sagrado.

—Lo cantaré si quiere —dijo Mirah—, pero no diré las palabras reales, solo de vez en cuando alguna que otra sílaba parecida, el resto lo inventaré. ¿Sabe usted hebreo? Porque si lo sabe, mi canto parecerá una tontería infantil.

Deronda meneó la cabeza.

—Para mí será como si fuese en hebreo.

Mirah cruzó los pies y las manos poniéndose cómoda, y luego levantó la cabeza formando un ángulo como si mirara a un rostro invisible inclinado sobre ella, mientras cantaba un pequeño himno de curiosos intervalos melancólicos, con sílabas que realmente parecían susurros infantiles a su audiencia; pero la voz con que las pronunciaba reunía una ternura aún más dulce y envolvente que las de las otras canciones.

—Aunque conociera las palabras de verdad, continuaría cantándola de esta manera —dijo Mirah, tras repetir varias veces el himno.

—¿Y por qué no? —dijo Deronda—. Las sílabas susurradas están llenas de sentido.

—Ciertamente sí —dijo la señora Meyrick—. Una madre oye algo así como un susurro siempre que hablan sus hijos. Sus palabras no son como las que todo el mundo dice, aunque sean pronunciadas de la misma manera. Si viviera lo suficiente como para ver viejo a mi hijo Hans, todavía vería en él a un niño. El amor de una madre, suelo decir, es como un árbol que contiene en él todo el bosque, desde el primer retoño hasta el último.

—¿No pasa también lo mismo con la amistad? —dijo Deronda sonriendo —. No debemos dejar a las madres ser tan arrogantes.

La pequeña y brillante madre sacudió la cabeza sobre su zurcido.

—Es más fácil encontrar a una madre que perdure que a un amigo fiel. La amistad empieza por un sentimiento de agrado o de gratitud, pero son raíces que pueden ser arrancadas. El amor de una madre comienza desde algo mucho más profundo.

—Como lo que usted dijo sobre la influencia de las voces —dijo Deronda, mirando a Mirah—. No creo que su himno hubiera tenido más expresión para mí si hubiera conocido la letra. Fui a la sinagoga en Frankfurt antes de venir a casa, y la ceremonia me impresionó tanto como si hubiera seguido las palabras, tal vez incluso más.

—Oh, ¿fue para usted algo grande? ¿Le llegó al corazón? —dijo Mirah ilusionada—. Creía que nadie excepto nuestro pueblo podía sentir eso. Pensaba que era inaccesible como un río en un valle cerrado, donde solo el cielo puede ver… quiero decir… —dudaba, sintiendo que no podía disociar su pensamiento de la imagen que le provocaba.

—Comprendo —dijo Deronda—. Pero no existe realmente tal separación, tan profunda, como dice la señora Meyrick. Nuestra religión es en lo principal una religión hebrea; y dado que los judíos son hombres, sus sentimientos religiosos deben tener mucho en común con los de otros hombres, igual que su poesía, aunque de una forma peculiar, debe tener mucho en común con la de otras naciones. Con todo, es de esperar que un judío sienta más las formas de la religión de su pueblo que una persona de otra raza, y aún así… —en esto Deronda dudó a su vez—, tal vez no sea siempre así.

—Ah no —dijo Mirah, tristemente—. Ya he visto eso. Los he visto burlarse. ¿No es como reírse de los padres de uno, como regocijarse en la

vergüenza de ellos?

—Algunas personas naturalmente se rebelan contra lo que fueron educadas, y les gusta lo contrario: ven con más profundidad las faltas de lo que conocen —dijo Deronda, en tono de disculpa.

—Pero usted no es así —dijo Mirah, mirándole fijamente de forma inconsciente.

—No, creo que no —dijo Deronda—; pero ya sabe que yo no fui educado como judío.

—Ah, siempre lo olvido —dijo Mirah, como si recordara algo con decepción y sonrojándose ligeramente.

También Deronda se sintió algo incómodo, y hubo una pausa embarazosa, a la que puso fin diciendo animadamente:

—Sea cual sea el camino que tomemos, tendremos que tolerarnos los unos a los otros; pues si todos nos opusiéramos a lo que nos han enseñado, también seríamos todos diferentes.

—Cierto. No dejaríamos de avanzar dando tumbos —dijo la señora Meyrick—. Creo que es propio de una debilidad mental seguir un credo construido a base de ir en contra. Pero uno puede seguir honrando a sus padres sin seguir exactamente sus principios, como puede hacerlo sin vestir exactamente igual que ellos. Mi padre era un calvinista escocés y mi madre una calvinista francesa; yo no soy escocesa ni francesa, ni una mezcla de dos tipos de calvinismo, pero aún así honro el recuerdo de mis padres.

—Pero yo no podría ser otra cosa que judía —dijo Mirah insistiendo—, incluso aunque cambiara de creencia.

—No, querida. Pero si los judíos y judías siguieran cambiando de religión, y se unieran al cristianismo, llegaría un tiempo en el que ya no habría judíos —dijo la señora Meyrick, regocijándose en sus palabras.

—Oh, por favor, no diga eso —dijo Mirah con lágrimas en los ojos—. Es la primera vez que le oigo decir algo grosero. No seré yo quien empiece. Nunca me separaré del pueblo de mi madre. Me vi obligada a huir de mi padre; pero si él volviera en su vejez y debilidad, y me necesitase, ¿diría que no es mi padre? Si la vergüenza le acompañase, yo debería compartirla. Es él el padre que tengo, y no otro. Y lo mismo ocurre con mi pueblo. Siempre seré una judía. Amo a los cristianos que son buenos, como ustedes. Pero siempre estaré unida a mi pueblo. Siempre expresaré mis cantos de alabanza con ellos.

A medida que Mirah hablaba, iba envolviéndose en una pasión afligida —ferviente, no violenta. Sosteniendo sus pequeñas manos fuertemente unidas y

mirando implorante a la señora Meyrick, le parecía a Deronda una personificación de ese espíritu que impulsaba a los hombres tras una larga vida de catolicismo profeso a abandonar sus riquezas y posición, y arriesgar su vida al unirse a su propio pueblo y decir: «Soy judío».

—¡Mirah, Mirah, mi querida hija, no me has entendido! —dijo la señora Meyrick, alarmada—. Que Dios me impida querer algo que vaya contra tu conciencia. Solo estaba diciendo lo que ocurriría si el mundo continuara así. Pero habría hecho mejor en dejar el mundo tranquilo y no querer hacerme la sabia. ¡Venga, perdóname! No trataremos de sacarte de nadie que creas que tiene más derecho sobre ti.

—Haría cualquier otra cosa por ustedes. Les debo mi vida —dijo Mirah, todavía no del todo calmada.

—Calla, calla —dijo la señora Meyrick—. Ya he tenido suficiente castigo por soltar la lengua tontamente y «contribuir a las frases del almanaque del milenio», como solía decirme mi marido.

—Pero todas las cosas de este mundo tienen su fin. Debemos acostumbrarnos a pensar así —dijo Mab, que no podía resistir quedarse callada sobre este punto. Ya había tenido que morderse la lengua en demasiadas ocasiones y parecía que tendría que seguir así si a Mirah se la iba a consentir en sus injustificadas susceptibilidades por observaciones inocentes.

Deronda sonrió al rostro rubio e irregular, que contrastaba extrañamente con el de Mirah; sonrió más bien sarcásticamente, pensó Mab, mientras él decía:

—La perspectiva de que todo vaya a terminar no nos es muy útil en la práctica. Los sentimientos de Mirah, nos ha dicho, se refieren a lo que existe actualmente.

Mab estaba confusa y pensó que habría sido mejor no haber hablado, dado que el señor Deronda parecía pensar que ella estaba culpando a Mirah; pero haber hablado una vez es una poderosa razón para seguir hablando, y añadió:

—Solo quería decir que debemos estar preparados para oír ciertas cosas, si no, apenas podremos hablar de nada. —Mab supuso que su argumento era irrebatible, compartiendo la opinión de Sócrates—: ¿Qué motivo tiene un hombre para vivir, si no es el del placer del discurso?

Deronda se marchó poco después, y cuando la señora Meyrick salió con él para intercambiar unas breves palabras sobre Mirah, él dijo:

—Hans compartirá conmigo mi habitación cuando venga en Navidad.

—¿Has escrito a Roma sobre eso? —dijo la señora Meyrick, a la que se le iluminó la cara—. ¡Qué bueno y sensato por tu parte! ¿Le comentaste que era por Mirah, entonces?

—Sí, dije que lo hice por ella. Pensé que usted se lo había contado todo.

—Debo confesar mi locura. Todavía no he escrito una palabra sobre ella. Siempre he pretendido hacerlo, pero aún no he acabado una carta en la que la mencione. Y le dije a las chicas que me lo dejaran a mí. En fin… Muchísimas gracias de todos modos.

Deronda adivinaba algo de lo que pensaba la madre, y ese presentimiento reforzaba cierta ansiedad ya presente en él. Y ese soliloquio interno no era tranquilizador. Se dijo que ningún hombre podía mirar a esta exquisita criatura sin creer que podía enamorarse de ella; pero todo el fervor de su naturaleza caminaba por el lado de la precaución. Hay personajes que se sienten trágicos porque avanzan por terrenos pantanosos, arrastrando a otros con ellos, y luego claman contra los dioses. Deronda había decidido resueltamente no imitarlos.

—Tengo las riendas bien sujetas —pensó—, y no voy a soltarlas. Me alejaré en lo posible de la tentación.

Enseguida entendió las razones. ¿Cómo iba a ser el custodio de Mirah y pretender compartir esa tarea con la señora Meyrick, a quien se la había encomendado, si su actitud era la de un pretendiente, al que ella no amaba —y con el que no se casaría—? Y si él fomentaba cualquier germen de sentimiento amoroso en sí mismo, provocaría un desenlace fatal. La naturaleza de Mirah no era de las que podían dividirse en contra de sí misma; e incluso si el amor la venciera y accediera a casarse con un hombre que no era de su raza y religión, jamás sería feliz al ir en contra de ese fuerte prejuicio innato que seguiría martilleándole la conciencia como remordimiento.

Deronda preveía esas consecuencias de la misma forma que nosotros vemos el peligro de estropear un trabajo bien empezado. Era una satisfacción haber rescatado a esa chica familiarizada con el dolor, y pensar que había puesto sus pequeños pies en el buen camino. La criatura que salvamos, aunque solo sea un jilguero medio silvestre, herido y perdido en el camino, ¡cómo la vigilamos y la protegemos, y nos alegramos de su recuperación! Nuestra vanidad se transforma en amor, nuestro yo sale de sí mismo y se vuelve virtuoso siempre que secretamente ayudamos a una vida a salir de su

miseria y esperamos el único triunfo de la alegría secreta de saber que el otro es mejor gracias a nosotros.

«Antes ofrecería mi dedo a los perros para que lo mordieran que disturbar su paz», se dijo Deronda. Había tenido mucha suerte en contar con amigos como los Meyrick donde poder ubicarla —amigos generosos y amables sin altanería alguna, de forma que depender de ellos no implicaba solamente para ella protección, sino también felicidad—. No habría encontrado otro refugio para ella si este se derrumbara. Pero ¿de qué sirve que yo renuncie a ella y lo disponga todo como debe ser, si Hans, el chico que todo lo estropea, viene y lo desgracia todo?

Pocas cosas eran más probables. Hans estaba hecho para los líos: sus mismos miembros eran más frágiles que los de los demás, sus ojos atraían las moscas y a otros convidados irritantes. Pero era imposible impedir que Hans viniera a Londres. Pretendía conseguir un estudio allí y hacer de él su casa principal; y proponer que aplazara su llegada por algún supuesto motivo, ocultando el verdadero motivo de ganar tiempo para que Mirah estuviese en mejor posición y fuese más independiente, era impracticable. Al no tener otra opción, Deronda intentó creer que tanto él como la señora Meyrick se estaban preocupando inútilmente sobre algo que solo tenía probabilidades de ocurrir, pero que no tenía por qué; sin embargo, no lo logró; al contrario, continuó imaginándose cómo iba a reaccionar Hans, y en su imaginación le dio un enérgico aviso, aunque enseguida se arrepintió, al sospechar el sentimiento que su acaloramiento podía provocar en Hans. De esta forma no llegaba a ninguna conclusión, salvo que la situación era peculiar, y que no podía hacer planes hasta que los peligros no estuvieran más cerca. Salvar a una judía infeliz de ahogarse, era, sin duda, sorprendente, pero podía haberlo hecho cualquier policía; ahora bien, descubrir en Mirah una criatura tan particular era algo que bien podía traer consigo consecuencias excepcionales. Deronda no se permitió ni por un momento suponer que las consecuencias podían entrar profundamente en su vida. No había proyectado en la imagen de Mirah esa radiación penetrante que habría tenido si hubiera imaginado que ella le amaba a él. Cuando de la imaginación no emana tal idea (sea cierta o no) un hombre puede profundizar en su devoción sin perder la paz.

En cuanto a la búsqueda de la madre y el hermano de Mirah, Deronda se tomó las palabras de ella de ese día como garantía para aplazar cualquier medida inmediata. Su conciencia no se sentía del todo tranquila por este deseo de retrasarlo, no más de lo que estaba por no intentar saber la verdad de su

propia madre: en ambos casos sentía que no cumplía con el deber hacia uno de los padres, pero en ambos casos había una señalada animadversión a saber la verdad, que podía hacer cambiar el giro de los acontecimientos.

«Al menos echaré una ojeada», fue su determinación final. «Es posible que encuentre alguna maquinaria judía especial. Esperaré hasta las navidades».

¿Qué haríamos todos sin el calendario cuando queremos posponer un deber desagradable? Los admirables ciclos del sistema solar, por los que medimos el tiempo, siempre nos proporcionan una época antes de la cual no vale la pena comenzar nada para lo que no tenemos ganas.

Capítulo 33

> —Ningún orador —dice un Rabino, como ejemplo indiscutible— puede decir que utilizaría los huesos de sus padres como cucharas —estando seguro que sus oyentes se rebelarían contra esa forma de economía. El mercado de las cucharas nunca se ha expandido tanto como para que alguien se preguntara—: ¿Por qué no? —y que argumentara que el progreso humano se basa en aprovechar el material de esa manera. La única alegación es la creencia que no hay por qué admitir que los sentimientos son la mejor riqueza del mundo.

DERONDA, MIENTRAS TANTO, SE ACOSTUMBRÓ A UNA FORMA DE EJERCICIO MENOS DE moda que montar a caballo en Rotten Row. A menudo deambulaba por esas partes de Londres más frecuentadas por los judíos: entraba en las sinagogas a las horas de las ceremonias, miraba las tiendas, observaba rostros: un proceso no muy prometedor para un descubrimiento particular. ¿Por qué no se dirigía a un Rabino influyente o a cualquier otro miembro de la comunidad judía para consultar sobre las posibilidades de encontrar una madre llamada Cohen con un hijo llamado Esdras y una hija perdida llamada Mirah? Pensó en hacer esto… después de Navidad. El hecho era que, a pesar de percibir poesía en las cosas comunes, Deronda, allí donde veía un interés personal profundo, no podía dejar de escapar, como cualquiera de nosotros, del sufrimiento que le provocaba la presión de ese duro y poco complaciente Estado Actual, que nunca consulta nuestras preferencias y que no puede elegirse. El entusiasmo, ya lo sabemos, se encuentra a gusto entre las ideas, tolera el aliento a ajo de la Edad Media, y no ve despilfarro alguno en los atavíos oficiales de las procesiones; pero se vuelve escrupuloso cuando los ideales van tomando cuerpo poco a poco, y apenas puede afrontarlos sin desvanecerse. Estando tumbado soñadoramente en una barca, imaginándose en busca de los familiares de una hermosa doncella en Córdoba protegidos por los judíos en tiempos de Ibn Gabirol[150], se soportan todas las desventuras sin problemas. O si el escenario de St Mary Axe y Whitechapel[151] fueran transportados imaginariamente a los bordes del Rin a finales del siglo XI, cuando los que esperaban oír las señales del Mesías, los gritos de guerra de los cruzados, «¡Hep! ¡Hep! ¡Hep!»[152] sonaban como el aullido de los sabuesos; y si en presencia de esos misioneros diabólicos con espadas y agitando trozos de madera ardientes, la despreciada figura del judío blasfemo apareciera erguida, heroica, iluminada con perseverancia sublime ante la tortura y la muerte, ¿qué

efecto tendrían las sórdidas tiendas y los rostros grotescos sobre aquellos que contemplasen estas escenas con emoción? Pero el fervor compasivo con el que contemplamos un gran martirio es débil comparado con el entusiasmo que se mantiene vivo cuando no hay peligro ni retos —nada excepto un mediodía sin interés en un lugar común, tal vez, medio repulsivo, cosas que son realmente las ideas amadas encarnadas. En esto yace sin duda la principal energía poética: en la fuerza de la imaginación que traspasa o exalta el hecho sólido, en lugar de flotar sobre nubes de imágenes. Gloriarse en una visión profética en la que la tierra se llene de conocimiento es un ejercicio más fácil para la imaginación crédula que ver sus inicios en los anuncios de los periódicos, observándote desde un puente más allá de los campos de trigo; y bien podría pasarnos a cualquiera de nosotros, gente refinada, que nos encontráramos en el centro de la batalla de Armageddon sin ser más conscientes que la molestia de unos pocos explosivos y algo de lucha alrededor nuestro.

Formaba parte de la naturaleza de Deronda el menospreciar la compasión débil y remilgada que se muestra en muchas ocasiones la humanidad; pero ahora, al tener presente a Mirah como una realidad viva de cuya vida se sentía responsable, veía a cada judío y judía común en comparación con ella, y tenía un presentimiento del choque que iba a producirse entre su idea de la madre y el hermano desconocidos y el hecho verdadero —un presentimiento muy vivo en él, al ser consciente, aunque no quisiera pensar en ello, de que él mismo podía experimentar un choque parecido con su destino—. No es que hubiera mirado con más expectativas y mayor complacencia a los judíos ricos, que aventajaban a los señores de los filisteos en sus presas; pero como no había muchas posibilidades de encontrar a los amigos de Mirah entre esa clase, sus costumbres no le afectaron mucho. Deambuló en este estado de ánimo, sin esperar más resultados positivos que el preparar un poco su mente, quizás para seguir teorizando en el futuro o bien para la práctica igual que si Mirah hubiera estado emparentada con mineros galeses, él hubiera ido a investigar las formas de proceder de esa gente, no sin desear al mismo tiempo conocer más en detalle la historia de las huelgas.

En realidad, no quería encontrar a nadie en particular, y cuando, según su costumbre, miraba los nombres sobre las puertas de las tiendas, se alegraba de no ver el de Esdras Cohen. Confieso que él deseaba sobre todo que Esdras Cohen no regentara ninguna tienda. Hay quien dice que tener deseos es algo de mal agüero; los que creen esto aseguran que el mundo está hecho de forma

que si consideras como algo impío el estrabismo, lo más probable es que alguno de tus hijos nazca bizco; de igual forma, si llegaras a desear que alguno naciera bizco, no lo conseguirías. Este modo desesperanzador de considerar la probabilidad no lo comparten en absoluto los optimistas, que sienten que sus deseos se cumplirán con toda seguridad en cualquier situación. ¿Quién es absolutamente neutral? Una mañana en la que Deronda resultó ir a parar a una pequeña calle alejado del ruido y ajetreo de Holborn, sintió que la balanza caía hacia el lado desesperanzador.

Estaba bastante cansado de las calles y se había parado a saludar a un cabriolé[153] que vio venir, cuando unos viejos broches bañados en plata y exhibidos en la ventana de su derecha captaron su atención. Su primer pensamiento fue que Lady Mallinger, que tenía un gusto muy protestante por tales botines católicos, le habría gustado ver convertidos esos broches procedentes de las abrazaderas de los misales en brazaletes; luego sus ojos recorrieron los demás componentes del escaparate, y se dio cuenta que la tienda era la típica tienda de un prestamista donde lo que se vendía principalmente eran joyas, encajes y objetos ambiguos de todo tipo presentados como baratijas. Una placa en una esquina anunciaba: *Relojes y Joyas intercambiados y reparados*. Pero su curiosidad había sido percibida desde el interior, y apareció una figura en la puerta, que se lo quedó mirando y le dijo, en tono animado y cordial:

—Buen día, señor.

El instante fue suficiente para que Deronda viera que la cara, inconfundiblemente judía, pertenecía a un joven de unos treinta años; y temiendo las palabras de persuasión que probablemente le dirigiría el dueño, tan pronto como le devolvió el saludo, cruzó al otro lado de la calle y llamó por señas al cochero para que parara allí. Desde ese lugar vio el nombre que había sobre el escaparate de la tienda: *Esdras Cohen*.

Podría haber cien letreros con el nombre de Esdras Cohen sobre los escaparates, pero Deronda no los había visto. Probablemente, el joven interesado en un posible cliente era el mismo Esdras; y era de la edad que tendría el hermano de Mirah, que ya era mayor cuando ella todavía era una niña. Pero el primer esfuerzo de Deronda mientras regresaba en el coche a casa fue el de convencerse que no había la más mínima garantía que este Esdras fuese el hermano de Mirah; y además, incluso si resultara ser su hermano, en contra de lo que dictaba la lógica, y averiguara que su madre estaba muerta, no era su deber, el de Deronda, hacérselo conocer a Mirah.

Desgraciadamente, enseguida tuvo que poner en duda esta conclusión al acordarse de que Mirah había expresado hacía poco un religioso deseo de conocer si su madre estaba muerta, así como de saber si su hermano vivía. ¿Hasta qué punto tenía derecho a determinar otra vida por sus propios conocimientos? ¿No era su protesta secreta contra el modo en que los demás habían arreglado su propia vida por lo que no se aclaraba respecto a sus relaciones, de forma que él no tenía, como otros hombres, una guía segura sobre sus deberes principales?

Enseguida sintió un alivio inmediato por este debate interno al reflexionar que todavía no había hecho ningún verdadero descubrimiento, y que si miraba a los hechos más de cerca no había motivo alguno para sentirse presionado por tomar una decisión u otra. Tenía la intención de volver a esa tienda tan pronto como le fuera bien y comprar los broches para Lady Mallinger. Pero durante varios días Sir Hugo se lo impidió, pues estaba a punto de dar una charla de sobremesa sobre un tópico candente, y quería que Deronda investigara por él la parte legal de la cuestión, además de perder cada día el tiempo en discusiones que siempre acababan en tablas. Como en otras muchas cuestiones, mantenían diferentes puntos de vista; pero a Sir Hugo no le importaba, y una vez que Deronda dejó clara su posición, le respondió con una mezcla de satisfacción y pesadumbre:

—¡Qué demonios, Dan! ¿Por qué no aprovechas una oportunidad de decir estas cosas en público? Estás equivocado, ya lo sabes. No tendrás éxito. Tienes el sentimiento masivo, la artillería pesada de un país en tu contra. Pero es el mejor escenario para que un joven se luzca. Debería haberlo hecho yo mismo cuando tenía tu edad. Y te iría bien estar en desacuerdo conmigo en algunos puntos. Haría que destacases más. Si quisieras aprovechar una ocasión de este tipo, deberías entrar en el Parlamento sin perder más tiempo. Y ya sabes que eso me daría una gran alegría.

—Siento no hacer lo que le daría grandes alegrías, señor —dijo Deronda —. Pero no puedo persuadirme de mirar la política como una profesión para mí.

—¿Por qué no? Si un hombre no ha nacido por su posición para estar en la vida pública, no hay más remedio que conseguirlo por sus propios méritos. Hay que sacar adelante los negocios del país, contribuir a que perdure el gobierno de su Majestad, como decía el viejo Duque[154]. Y no haríamos nunca nada, hijo mío, si todo el mundo mirara la política como si fuera una profecía y se pidiera una vocación especial. Si vas a entrar en el Parlamento,

no te servirá de mucho sentarte tranquilamente a esperar una llamada del cielo o de los constituyentes.

—No quiero vivir de la opinión —dijo Deronda—, sobre todo de la opinión de los demás. No es que esté criticando la labor de otros hombres. Solo que hay muchos tipos mejor preparados que yo a los que no les importa subirse a un estrado para alabarse, y dar su palabra de honor por un partido.

—Te diré el qué, Dan —dijo Sir Hugo—, un hombre que se opone rotundamente a cualquier tipo de farsa es sencillamente un hombre enigmático e incomprensible. Hay un tipo de engaños que son malos, pero también los hay que son beneficiosos, los que desengrasan las ruedas y hacen posible el progreso. Si tienes que conducir hombres, tienes que hacerlo a través de sus propias ideas; y estoy de acuerdo con la actitud del arzobispo de Nápoles, que organizó una procesión de San Genaro[155] contra la peste. No sirve de nada decretar una ordenanza contra la superficialidad popular. Para poder llevar a cabo la acción hay que actuar un poco.

—Uno puede verse forzado a ceder ante una necesidad ocasional —dijo Deronda—. Pero una cosa es decir: «En esta ocasión concreta me siento obligado a ponerme este gorro de bufón y hacer muecas», y otra comprar un set de gorros de bufón y ejercitarse en el arte de hacer muecas. No veo que haya ninguna conveniencia pública de verdad que no mantenga unos ideales que pongan límites a las desviaciones del camino directo. Pero si me estableciera como hombre público podría arruinar mi propio éxito en beneficio de la conveniencia pública.

Fue justo después de esta conversación, bastante irritante para él, que Deronda salió a realizar su meditada segunda visita a Esdras Cohen. Entró por la calle opuesta a la entrada al barrio de Holborn, y una desgana interna aminoró su paso, mientras sus pensamientos transferían lo que acaba de decir sobre la conveniencia pública a la dificultad personal que le llevaba de nuevo a esta calle desagradable. Pronto podía convertirse en una inmediata cuestión práctica para él hasta qué punto podía llamar una conveniencia sensata encubrir el hecho de un parentesco cercano. Tales cuestiones que surgen constantemente en la vida se deciden a menudo de forma rápida y precipitada, y a muchos les parecería un refinamiento excesivo en Deronda que le diera tanta importancia al asunto. Pero ya hemos visto las razones por las que él había llegado a considerar el encubrimiento como una maldición, y su necesidad como algo que había evitar. La perspectiva de verse obligado a actuar en contra de su costumbre habitual era naturalmente irritante. Incluso

se fue parando ante los escaparates que eran más propios de llamar la atención de un hombre, medio decidido a no aumentar su conocimiento sobre el moderno Esdras, que sin duda no era un líder entre su gente, una duda que probaba cómo, en un hombre acostumbrado a razonar, una simple y sencilla posibilidad puede pesar más que la probabilidad mejor argumentada; pues el razonamiento de Deronda le había llevado a la conclusión de que todas las probabilidades estaban en contra de que este hombre fuera el hermano de Mirah.

Uno de los escaparates ante los que se paró era el de una tienda de libros de segunda mano, en la que, en una estrecha mesa puesta en el exterior, estaba representada la literatura de todos los tiempos en una mezcla bien ponderada, desde los versos inmortales de Homero a la prosa mortal de las novelas de ferrocarril. Que la mezcla le pareciese juiciosa a Deronda podía deberse a que encontró en ella algo que deseaba, a saber, la maravillosa autobiografía de Salomon Maimon[156], el judío polaco; y como le cabía fácilmente en el bolsillo, lo cogió y entró a la tienda a pagarlo, esperando ver tras el mostrador al típico personaje mugriento que muestra su indiferencia hacia las ventas, algo que parece universal en todos los vendedores de libros de segunda mano. En la mayoría del resto de comercios se encuentran hombres generosos que se muestran ansiosos por vender sus mercaderías preocupándose por la satisfacción del cliente; pero ni siquiera un judío venderá el Euclides de Simson[157] asegurando apasionadamente que se disfruta leyéndolo y que ojalá tuviera veinte ejemplares más, por lo solicitado que está. Uno acaba temiendo que un vendedor de libros de segunda mano pertenece a esa clase de hombres infelices que no creen en las cosas buenas que tiene lo que les permite ganarse la vida, sino que prefieren mostrarse malhumorados antes que zalameros en su vocación.

Sin embargo, en vez del comerciante común, vio, en la oscuridad del final de la larga y estrecha tienda, una figura que era algo sorprendente por su peculiaridad. Un hombre con las ropas raídas —cuya edad era difícil de adivinar por su tipo de piel fina y amarillenta, algo así como una entalladura vieja de marfil—, estaba sentado sobre un taburete y apoyado sobre unas estanterías de detrás del pequeño mostrador, no haciendo nada más remarcable que leer el *Times* del día anterior; pero cuando dejó el periódico en su regazo y miró al cliente que entraba, el pensamiento que pasó por la mente de Deronda fue que precisamente una fisionomía como esa podía haber sido la de un profeta del Destierro, o la de algún poeta del Hebreo moderno de la

época medieval. Era un rostro típicamente judío, con una expresión intensa, aparentemente debida a una vida ansiosa y extenuante en la que cualquier satisfacción se hubiera alcanzado de forma indirecta y muy remota, y tal vez también a causa de sufrimientos físicos, que implicaban esa ausencia de bienestar en el presente. Sus rasgos estaban bien marcados, sin ser exagerados; las cejas no eran altas pero sí anchas, perfectamente definidas por el pelo oscuro y rizado. Podía no haber sido nunca un rostro particularmente hermoso, pero debía haber sido siempre contundente; y ahora, con su mirada oscura y distante, y el relieve de su palidez en la oscuridad del fondo de la tienda, le daba a uno la sensación de haberse topado con una prisión de la Inquisición del pasado que una multitud hubiera forzado a abrirla de repente; y parecía mirar a ese cliente ocasional ansiosa e inquisitivamente como si fuera alguien que pudiera traerle noticias tanto de un nuevo nacimiento como de un fallecimiento. El rostro de este hombre era probablemente bastante familiar y corriente para los habitantes de esa calle; pero a Deronda le evocaba una mezcla tan extraña de lo insólito con lo común que hubo un intervalo de observación mutua antes de que lanzara su pregunta:

—¿Cuál es el precio de este libro?

Tras tomar el libro y examinar la hoja de guarda sin levantarse, el supuesto vendedor dijo:

—No marca el precio, y el señor Ram no está en estos momentos. Estoy al cargo de la tienda mientras él está comiendo. ¿Cuánto está dispuesto a ofrecer por él? —Se quedó con el libro sobre sus piernas con su mano encima y mirando con atención a Deronda, al que le vino la desagradable idea, que posiblemente este extraño personaje quería saber cuánto podía sacar de la ignorancia de un cliente sobre precios. Pero sin pensárselo más le dijo—: ¿Usted no sabe cuánto vale?

—No su precio de mercado. ¿Me permite preguntarle si lo ha leído?

—No. He leído una reseña sobre él, que es lo que me impulsa a comprarlo.

—¿Es usted un estudioso, un hombre al que le interese la historia judía? —lo dijo con un tono profundo de curiosidad ansiosa.

—Ciertamente estoy interesado en la historia judía —dijo Deronda tranquilamente, al que su curiosidad podía más que la tirria que le producía el tipo de inspección y de interrogatorio al que le estaba sometiendo.

Pero inmediatamente el extraño judío se incorporó de su sitio, y Deronda sintió una mano escuálida presionando fuertemente su brazo, mientras una

voz ronca y excitada, no más alta que un fuerte susurro, dijo:

—¿Tal vez sea usted de nuestra raza?

Deronda, al que no le gustó nada que le cogieran, enrojeció profundamente, y respondió con un ligero movimiento de cabeza:

—No.

La mano dejó de agarrarle y se retiró, el ardor de su semblante se transformó en melancolía desinteresada, como si hubiera sido un espíritu poseso el que hubiera saltado a los ojos y los gestos del hombre y se hubiera retirado de nuevo a las profundidades internas de su cuerpo; y alejándose un poco mientras mantenía el libro en sus manos, el desconocido dijo en un tono de cortesía distante:

—Creo que el señor Ram estará satisfecho con media corona, señor.

El efecto que produjo en Deronda este cambio —luego sonreiría al recordarlo— era extrañamente embarazoso y humillante, como si algún alto dignatario le hubiera considerado indigno y le hubiera despedido. No había nada más que decir, sin embargo: pagó su media corona y se llevó su *Lebensgshcichte*[158] de Salomon Maimon con un simple «buenos días».

Le molestó un poco terminar tan abruptamente la conversación y no poder saber un poco más de ese hombre, que desde luego era más bien peculiar —tan diferente probablemente como puede serlo un judío de Esdras Cohen, por cuya puerta estaba en esos momentos entrando Deronda, y cuyo próspero semblante que se veía en camino de estar engordando, aparecía tras el mostrador negociando con otra persona al otro lado del tabique sobre dos tapones niquelados y tres cucharillas de té, que estaban ante él—. Al ver entrar a Deronda gritó:

—¡Madre! ¡Madre! —y luego con asentimiento y una sonrisa familiar dijo —: Venga, señor, venga directamente.

Deronda no puedo evitar mirar hacia la puerta de atrás con cierta ansiedad, que no calmó el ver a una mujer vigorosa más allá de los cincuenta entrar y acercarse para atenderle. No es que hubiera en ella nada muy repulsivo: lo peor que podía decirse era que tenía pinta de haberse aseado con poca agua, y al acostarse, cosa común entre gente mayor de su clase, y de haber dormido presumiblemente con sus pendientes, si no con sus anillos y su collar. De hecho, lo que angustió a Deronda fue que no fuera tan tosca y fea como para excluir que fuese la madre de Mirah. Cualquiera que haya mirado a un rostro con el fin de intentar discernir signos de algún familiar conocido entenderá su proceso de deducción: trató de pensar cómo habría sido ese

rostro antes de que su actual grosor hubiera ido ocultando los rasgos de la juventud, y distinguir lo que se conoce como las expresiones elementales de la cara. Lamentaba no encontrar nada que refutara sus temores. De la misma forma que era plausible que este Esdras, educado en el comercio, pudiera asemejarse al granuja de su padre en todo salvo en su conocimiento y talento, tampoco era imposible que esta madre pudiera haber tenido a una hija encantadora y delicada cuyos rasgos y expresiones fueran como los de Mirah. Las cejas tenían un inoportuno parecido; ¿y quién puede decidir qué se esconde tras un rostro cuando los años furtivos lo han alejado de la siempre nueva procesión de la juventud? Todavía conservaba la sonrisa de sus ojos cuando dijo a Deronda, de una forma maternal, y en un tono suave y gutural:

—¿En qué puedo servirle, señor?

—Me gustaría mirar esos broches bañados en plata del escaparate —dijo Deronda—; los más grandes, por favor, los de esta esquina.

No eran fáciles de coger desde la situación de la madre, y el hijo, al darse cuenta le dijo:

—Ya los alcanzo yo, ya los alcanzo yo —adelantándose rápidamente, y le entregó los broches a Deronda sonriendo mientras le decía:

—Madre es demasiado orgullosa: quiere hacerlo todo por sí misma. Por eso la llamé para que le atendiera a usted. Cuando hay un caballero particular como cliente, no me atrevería a hacer otra cosa que no fuera llamarla. Pero no puedo permitir que se haga daño estirándose más de la cuenta.

Y el señor Cohen cedió el sitio de nuevo a su madre, que soltó una pequeña risa gutural amistosa mientras observaba a Deronda y decía:

—Este chico hace mucha broma, pero ya ve que es el mejor hijo del mundo. —Por lo visto el hijo disfrutaba complaciéndola, aunque también deseaba de esta forma hacer ver sus disculpas ante este distinguido cliente por no ofrecerle el honor de su atención exclusiva.

Deronda comenzó a examinar los broches como si tuviera muchas cosas que observar antes de tomar una decisión.

—Solo valen tres guineas, señor —dijo la madre, animándole.

—Trabajo de primera, señor, su verdadero valor es el doble de lo que cuesta; las conseguí regateándolas en Colonia —dijo el hijo, a modo de aclaración, desde lo lejos.

Mientras tanto entraron dos nuevos clientes, y el hijo hizo una nueva llamada: «¡Addy!», que trajo del final de la tienda a un grupo que hizo que Deronda se girara a mirarles con atención, estando seguro que su mirada sería

considerada como de cortesía. El grupo consistía en una mujer de ojos oscuros que llevaba en brazos un bebé también de ojos oscuros, con la cabeza bien cubierta por un espeso pelo rizado, y lo dejó encima del mostrador, desde donde observaba a su alrededor con una inteligencia superior a lo normal; también venía un niño robusto de unos seis años y una niña más pequeña, ambos de ojos oscuros y cabello negro y rizado, de aspecto más semítico que sus padres, igual que los cachorros de león muestran las marcas de progenitores remotos. La joven mujer que respondía al nombre de «Addy» —una especie de periquito, vestida de azul brillante, con un collar y pendientes de coral, y el pelo recogido en un gran moño, parecía tan vivaracha y vulgar como su marido—; y a causa de cierta diferencia con la madre se ahondó en Deronda la inoportuna impresión de que esta no era una judía tan común como para excluirla de poder ser la madre de Mirah. Mientras este pensamiento danzaba por la mente de Deronda, el chico había entrado corriendo por la tienda impetuosamente, y parándose a un metro de Deronda, con las manos en los bolsillos de sus pantaloncitos tipo Knickerbockers[159], le miró con cierto aire precoz de inspección. Deronda, tal vez con la intención diplomática de demorarse y congraciarse con el niño, le dio unas palmaditas en la cabeza y le dijo:

—¿Cómo te llamas, señorito?

—Jacob Alexander Cohen —dijo el hombrecito, con gran desenvoltura y distinción.

—Así que no te han puesto el nombre de tu padre.

—No, el de mi abuelo. Vende cuchillos y navajas y tijeras, eso hace mi abuelo —dijo Jacob, queriendo impresionar al desconocido con esa asociación—. Él me dio esta navaja. —Y sacó una navaja de bolsillo, que sus dedos pequeños, de color oscuro, tanto por naturaliza como por suciedad, abrieron con gran rapidez dos cuchillas y un sacacorchos.

—¿No es eso una cosa peligrosa para jugar? —dijo Deronda, dirigiéndose a la madre.

—¡Nunca se hará daño, por Dios!

—¿Tiene usted una navaja? —dijo Jacob, acercándose. Su voz sonaba ronca en sus labios, como si perteneciera al alma de un comercial experimentado, cansada de regatear durante muchas generaciones.

—Sí. ¿Quieres verla? —dijo Deronda, sacando una pequeña navaja del bolsillo de su chaleco.

Jacob la agarró inmediatamente y se apartó un poco, sosteniendo las dos navajas en sus palmas e inclinándose sobre ellas comparándolas detenidamente. Por entonces los otros clientes se habían ido, y toda la familia se había agrupado, centrando su atención en el maravilloso Jacob: el padre, la madre y la abuela detrás del mostrador, sosteniendo al bebé que miraba atónito, y la niña pequeña delante de él, apoyándose en el codo de su hermano para observar también las navajas.

—La mía es mejor —dijo Jacob, finalmente, devolviéndole a Deronda la suya, como si hubiera estado valorando la idea de intercambiarlas y al final la hubiera rechazado.

El padre y la madre rieron en voz alta encantados.

—Nunca verá que Jacob escoja lo peor —dijo el señor Cohen, guiñando el ojo, y seguro de la admiración del cliente. Deronda, mirando a la abuela, que reía silenciosamente, dijo:

—¿Son estos los únicos nietos que tiene?

—Todos. Este es mi único hijo —contestó, en un tono comunicativo a Deronda, cuya mirada y su porte transmitían como siempre la impresión de un interés sensible, y que en esta ocasión sirvió bien a su propósito. Hizo parecer natural el que dijese:

—¿Y no tiene ninguna hija?

Hubo un cambio instantáneo en la cara de la mujer. Sus labios se cerraron firmemente, pasó las manos por el mostrador, y finalmente dio la espalda a Deronda para observar unos pañuelos indios empeñados que colgaban enfrente de ella. Su hijo le lanzó una mirada expresiva, se encogió de hombros y se llevó el dedo índice a los labios; luego añadió rápidamente:

—Creo que usted es un caballero de primera en la ciudad, señor, si me permite adivinarlo.

—No —dijo Deronda, con aire preocupado— no tengo nada que ver con la ciudad.

—Mal negocio. Pensé que usted podría ser el joven representante de una empresa de primer nivel —dijo el señor Cohen, con la intención de correr un tupido velo por el daño causado por el deseo natural de su cliente de querer saber más de él y de los suyos—. Pero entiende de orfebrería, veo.

—Un poco —dijo Deronda, tomando por un momento los broches y dejándolos de nuevo. Esa evidencia circunstancial e inoportuna le hizo ver que era mejor disimular más de lo que nunca había sido consciente. Pero la

simple posibilidad de que un poco más de conocimiento pudiera negar esa evidencia, venció su inclinación a permanecer en la incertidumbre.

—Para decirle la verdad —continuó—, he entrado más bien a dejar en préstamo que a comprar. Diría que usted acepta transacciones fuertes en ocasiones.

—Bueno, señor, he acomodado a caballeros distinguidos, estoy orgulloso de decirlo. No cambiaría mi negocio por nada del mundo. No hay nada más loable, ni más benéfico, ni más necesario para todas las clases, desde la buena señora que quiere algo de líquido para la panadería, al caballero como usted, señor, que puede quererlo por diversión. Me gusta mi negocio, me gusta mi calle, y me gusta mi tienda. No la tendría una puerta más lejos. Y no empeñaría mi tienda, señor, para ser el Alcalde principal. Esto te pone muy en contacto con el mundo. Yo digo que es como las rentas públicas del Gobierno: abarca todo el metal y el oro del país. Y un hombre que no consigue dinero, señor, no puede acomodarse. Y bien, ¿qué puedo hacer por usted, señor?

Si una inocente autosatisfacción es la medida del éxtasis terrestre, Salomón en toda su gloria fue un mortal digno de compasión comparado con el señor Cohen —que era claramente una de esas personas que, estando plenamente satisfechos de sí mismos, están siempre dispuestos a animar a los extraños haciéndoselo saber—. Mientras se daba a conocer con asombrosa rapidez, tomó al bebé de los brazos de su mujer y sujetándolo en su brazo le dejó que explorara con sus pequeños puños los rasgos de su cara. Deronda, que no estaba de buen humor, pensó para sí en un arrebato que este Esdras Cohen era el judío menos poético con el que se había topado en los libros o en la vida: su verbosidad no se parecía en nada a la del Antiguo Testamento; y ni una sombra de la Raza Atormentada distinguía la vulgaridad de su alma de la de un próspero vendedor ambulante de piel blanca y rosada del más puro linaje inglés. Es, naturalmente, un sentimiento cristiano que un judío no debiera ser engreído. No obstante, esto no era razón para no perseverar en su proyecto, y respondió inmediatamente en una aventurada ignorancia de tecnicismos:

—Tengo un diamante fino que ofrecer como seguridad; no lo llevo encima en estos momentos, desgraciadamente, pues no tengo la costumbre de llevarlo. Pero volveré otra vez esta noche y lo traeré. Cincuenta libras es lo que me iría bien.

—Bueno, ya sabe, esta noche es el Sabbath, caballero —dijo Cohen, e iré a la *School*[160]—. La tienda estará cerrada. Pero acomodar a la gente es un

trabajo de caridad; si no puede venir aquí antes, y los motivos apremian, ¡pues me quedaré a ver su diamante! Usted es tal vez del West End[161], algo lejos de aquí.

—Sí, y el Sabbath de ustedes comienza temprano en esta época. Puedo estar aquí a las cinco, ¿es posible? —Deronda había contado con que al preguntar si podía venir un viernes por la noche, tendría una buena oportunidad de observar ciertas cosas del carácter de la familia, y que pudiera incluso ser capaz de plantear alguna cuestión decisiva.

Cohen asintió; pero en esto, el asombroso Jacob, cuyo físico mostraba una precocidad que habría puesto en evidencia a un gentil de su edad, demostró que había estado escuchando, entendiéndolo todo al decir:

—Va usted a volver de nuevo. ¿Tiene más navajas en casa?

—Creo que tengo una.

—¿Tiene dos cuchillas y un garfio, y un mango blanco como ese? —dijo Jacob, señalando al bolsillo del chaleco.

—Diría que sí.

—¿Le gustaría un sacacorchos? —dijo Jacob, exhibiendo el artículo de su propia navaja de nuevo, y mirando muy seria e inquisitivamente.

—Sí —dijo Deronda, a modo experimental.

—Traiga su navaja, entonces, y las intercambiaremos, guardándose otra vez su navaja, y marcando el paso con la sensación de haber cerrado un buen trato.

La abuela había recobrado ya su actitud normal, y la familia entera miraba radiante a Deronda mientras este acariciaba el pelo de la niña pequeña, a la que hasta entonces no había prestado atención, y sentándola en el mostrador, pregunto también su nombre. Ella le miró en silencio, y se puso los dedos en sus pendientes de oro, de los que no parecía haberse dado cuenta.

—Se llama Adelaida Rebeca —dijo su madre orgullosamente—. Di algo al caballero, mi amor.

—Hoy vetido de Sabba —dijo Adelaida Rebeca.

—Se refiere a su vestido del Sabbath —explicó el padre—. Le pondremos su vestido del Sabbath esta noche.

—¿Y me dejarás ver cómo te queda, Adelaida? —dijo Deronda, con ese tono amable, que no le costaba nada adoptar.

—Di que sí, mi amor; sí, si así gusta, señor —dijo su madre, encantada con este apuesto y joven caballero, que sabía apreciar a los niños aventajados.

—¿Y me darás un beso esta noche? —dijo Deronda, con una mano en cada uno de sus pequeños hombros morenos.

Adelaida Rebeca (su miriñaque en miniatura y sus rasgos marcados pegaban con la combinación de sus nombres) inmediatamente puso sus labios en posición de adelantar el beso, después de lo cual, su padre, más satisfecho aún con las circunstancias y con el desconocido que era un admirador testigo, dijo cordialmente:

—Ya ve que hay alguien que estará decepcionado si no viene esta noche, señor. ¿No le importará sentarse en el puesto de nuestra familia y esperarme un poco, si no estoy cuando venga, señor? Haremos una excepción para acomodarle como se merece. Traiga el diamante, y veré lo que puedo hacer por usted.

De esta manera, Deronda dejó una impresión de lo más favorable tras él como preparación para un trato más cómodo. Pero por su parte, le había costado soportar tales amenidades. Si estos eran los parientes de Mirah, no podía imaginarse que incluso su ferviente devoción filial pudiera aportar a su reunión con ellos ninguna dulzura más allá de la que pueda encontrarse en el pleno cumplimiento de un deber doloroso. ¿Qué necesitaba este hermano jactancioso? Y aún suponiendo lo más favorable respecto a la hipotética madre, Deronda se estremeció ante la imagen de un primer encuentro entre ella y Mirah, y aún más ante la idea de la educación de Mirah con esta familia. Se refugió en el hecho de no creerlo. Encontrar a un Esdras Cohen cuando el nombre está dando vueltas por tu cabeza no es más extraordinario que hallar un Josiah Smith bajo circunstancias similares; y en cuanto a la coincidencia sobre la hija, probablemente habría alguna diferencia. Si, no obstante, lo que pudiera averiguar en el futuro confirmaba la conclusión más indeseable, ¿qué sería lo más conveniente? ¿Intentar ocultarlo y sacar de ello las mejores consecuencias, o afrontar otras consecuencias en aras de esa franqueza que es el dulce aire fresco de nuestra vida moral?

Capítulo 34

> Er ist geheissen
> Israel. Ihn hat verwandelt
> Hexenspruch in Einen Hund.
> Aber jeden Freitag Abend,
>
> In der Dämmrungstunde, plötzlich
> Weicht der Zauber, un der Hund
> *Wird aufs Neu'ein menslisch Wesen*[162].
>
> HEINE, *Prinzessin Sabbath*[163]

CUANDO DERONDA LLEGÓ A LAS CINCO EN PUNTO, LA TIENDA ESTABA CERRADA Y LA sirvienta cristiana le abrió la puerta. Una vez le introdujo en la sala de detrás de la tienda se sorprendió por la hermosura de la escena. La casa era vieja y bastante amplia en su parte de atrás; probablemente la espaciosa habitación en la que estaba entrando era triste a la luz del sol, pero ahora estaba agradablemente iluminada por una vieja lámpara de cobre con siete lamparillas de aceite colgando encima del mantel de color blanco nieve que cubría la mesa central. El techo y las paredes estaban impregnados de humo, y los rincones de la sala eran lo suficientemente oscuros como para hacer resaltar las figuras humanas, que aparecían con un fulgor veneciano. La abuela iba ataviada de un marrón amarillento con una larga cadena de oro que hacía las veces de collar, y bajo esta luz su cara blanca con sus marcadas cejas oscuras y el bucle que recogía su pelo gris aparecía tan hermosa como para un efecto pintoresco. La joven señora Cohen iba vestida de rojo y negro, con una serie de anchas perlas enrolladas alrededor de su cuello; el bebé yacía dormido en la cuna bajo una colcha color escarlata; Adelaida Rebeca llevaba un vestido trenzado de color ámbar; y Jacob Alexander llevaba ropa de pana de color negro con calcetines escarlata. Mientras los cuatro pares de ojos brillaban en su bienvenida a Deronda, él estaba casi avergonzado por el desdeñoso rechazo que le habían producido durante el día estas criaturas de aspecto feliz. Nada podía ser más cordial que los saludos que recibió, y tanto la madre como la abuela parecían reunir más dignidad al ser vistas en el hogar privado, y mostrando su hospitalidad. Miró sorprendido al mobiliario antiguo: el escritorio de roble y la alta mesita auxiliar debían haber llegado allí por alguna oportunidad y por temas económicos más que por el gusto de la

familia. Sobre la mesilla había un plato ancho de loza azul y amarilla, y a cada lado de él dos recipientes viejos de plata; en frente de ellos un gran volumen con tapas de pergamino oscuro y cosido cuidadosamente. En la esquina más alejada había una puerta abierta que daba a una habitación interior, que estaba también iluminada.

Deronda se fijó en estos detalles por medio de miradas furtivas mientras atendía la solicitud apremiante de Jacob acerca de la navaja. Se había tomado la molestia de comprar una con los requisitos del garfio y el mango blanco, y la sacó al pedírselo, diciendo:

—¿Es este el tipo de navaja que quieres, Jacob?

La sometió a un severo escrutinio, abrió el garfio y las cuchillas, y sacó el artículo de trueque con el sacacorchos para compararlas.

—¿Por qué prefieres un garfio a un sacacorchos? —le preguntó Deronda.

—Porque puedo sujetar más cosas con un garfio. Un sacacorchos solo sirve para corchos. Pero es mejor para usted; usted puede sacar corchos.

—¿Así que estás de acuerdo en intercambiarlos? —dijo Deronda, observando que la abuela escuchaba encantada.

—¿Qué más trae usted en sus bolsillos? —dijo Jacob, con deliberada seriedad.

—Calla ya, Jacob, cariño —dijo la abuela—. Y Deronda, consciente del respeto a la disciplina, le contestó:

—Creo que no debo decírtelo. Nuestro negocio se refería a las navajas.

Jacob levantó la vista para escudriñar su cara por unos momentos, y al parecer llegó a una conclusión, pues dijo muy serio:

—Lo cambio —entregándole la navaja con el sacacorchos a Deronda, que se lo guardó en el bolsillo también muy serio.

Inmediatamente, el pequeño hijo de Shem corrió a la habitación contigua, desde donde se oyó su voz conversando animadamente; y luego, regresó corriendo de nuevo, cuando, al ver entrar a su padre cogió un sombrero de pana que estaba en una silla, se lo puso y se acercó a él. Cohen llevaba puesto su propio sombrero y se lo dejó puesto sin hacer caso al visitante, quedándose de pie mientras los dos niños fueron a por él y abrazaron sus rodillas; entonces, puso sus manos sobre cada uno de ellos y pronunció su bendición hebrea, después de lo cual, la mujer, que había tomado entonces al bebé de la cuna, se lo llevó a su marido y lo sujetó bajo sus manos extendidas para que lo bendijera mientras dormía. Por el momento Deronda pensó que este prestamista orgulloso de su vocación no era del todo ramplón.

—Bien, señor, ha hallado usted la bienvenida en mi familia, creo —dijo Cohen, sacándose el sombrero, y recuperando su propia compostura—. Y ha sido puntual. Nada como un poco de tensión aquí —dijo dando unos golpes al bolsillo de su pantalón a la vez que se sentaba—. Es bueno para todos. Yo lo he vivido cuando he tenido que afrontar pagos. Empecé pronto, tuve que cambiar de rumbo y ponerme al día para tapar todos los agujeros. Es estimulante para la mente. Pero en fin; veamos, veamos.

—Este es el anillo del que le hablé —dijo Deronda, sacándoselo del dedo —. Creo que costó mil libras. Supongo que serán suficientes como prenda quinientos. Probablemente venga a redimirlo en un mes o así.

Los ojos brillantes de Cohen parecían acercarse un poco más entre sí mientras aguantaron la mirada ingenua de este joven y tosco caballero, que por lo visto suponía que la redención era una satisfacción para los prestamistas. Cogió el anillo, lo examinó y se lo devolvió, diciendo con indiferencia:

—Bueno, bueno. Hablaremos de eso después de la comida. Tal vez quiera unirse a nosotros, si no tiene nada que objetar. Tanto yo como mi mujer nos sentiremos honrados, y también mi madre, ¿no es así, madre?

Ambas le animaron a quedarse y Deronda aceptó de buen grado. Todos se dirigieron hacia la mesa. No había ningún plato salvo uno cubierto con una servilleta; y la señora Cohen había dispuesto un cuenco de loza cerca de su marido para que pudiera lavarse en él las manos. Pero tras ponerse de nuevo su sombrero, hizo una pausa, y llamó en voz alta:

—¡Mardoqueo!

«¿Será esto parte de la ceremonia religiosa?», pensó Deronda, sin saber lo que podía esperarse del antiguo héroe[164]. Pero oyó un «Sí» de la habitación contigua, que le hizo mirar hacia la puerta abierta; y allí, para su asombro, vio la figura del enigmático judío con el que se había topado esta mañana en la librería. Sus ojos se cruzaron, y Mardoqueo parecía tan sorprendido como Deronda, sin que ninguno de los dos mostrara en su sorpresa ningún signo de reconocimiento. Pero cuando Mardoqueo se sentó al final de la mesa, inclinó su cabeza hacia el invitado de una forma fría y distante, como si la decepción de la mañana perdurara desagradablemente sobre este nuevo conocido.

Cohen se lavó las manos, mientras pronunciaba palabras hebreas; luego retiró la servilleta que cubría el plato dejando a la vista las dos hogazas alargadas de pan recubiertas de semillas —el memorial del maná que alimentó a los antepasados nómadas— y partiéndolo en pequeños trozos dio

uno a cada uno de los miembros de la familia, incluida Adelaida Rebeca, que estaba de pie en la silla exhibiendo todo su cuerpo cubierto con su prenda de color ámbar, y alargando su pequeña nariz al estirar su labio superior, cosa que hacía para parecer más digna del acto. Cohen pronunció otra bendición hebrea, durante la cual Jacob se puso su sombrero para imitar al resto de los hombres. Luego, descubrieron sus cabezas, se sentaron, y la comida prosiguió sin que hubiera nada remarcable para Deronda. No era muy consciente de qué platos comía, ya que estaba preocupado por dar un giro a la conversación que le permitiera hacer alguna pregunta importante, además de pensar en Mardoqueo, con el que intercambiaba miradas de asombro medio furtivas. Mardoqueo no llevaba un vestido elegante propio del Sabbath, aunque en lugar del abrigo negro desgastado y mohoso de la mañana llevaba uno de un color pardusco suave, que parecía como si alguna vez hubiera sido una hermosa gabardina suelta que se hubiera encogido por los lavados; y este cambio de ropa acentuaba de forma todavía más fuerte su ávido rostro de pelo oscuro, que bien podía haber pertenecido al profeta Ezequiel —probablemente tampoco muy a la moda a los ojos de sus contemporáneos—. Era de notar que dieron a Mardoqueo las colas de los pescados fritos, y en general el tipo de cosas que le tocan a un pariente pobre —sin duda, una costumbre que venía de la prehistoria, que todavía nadie admitía como supersticiosa—.

El señor Cohen llevaba vivamente la conversación, introduciendo temas de buen gusto (el judío está orgulloso de su lealtad) hacia la Reina y la Familia Real, el Emperador y la Emperatriz de Francia —en los cuales participaron con entusiasmo la abuela y la mujer—. La joven señora Cohen mostró una precisa memoria acerca de los aniversarios de las personas distinguidas; y la mayor ayudó a su hijo informando al invitado de lo que ocurrió cuando el emperador y la Emperatriz estuvieron en Inglaterra y visitaron la ciudad diez años antes.

—Diría que usted sabe todo esto mejor que nosotros, señor —decía Cohen cada vez que empezaba a dar nueva información; y la conversación se mantuvo prácticamente en un trío.

—Nuestro bebé se llama Eugenia Esther[165] —dijo vivamente la joven señora Cohen.

—Resulta maravilloso cómo el del Emperador se parece a un primo mío —dijo la abuela—; me impresionó mucho cuando lo vi. Nunca lo habría pensado.

—Madre y yo fuimos a ver al Emperador y a la Emperatriz al Palacio de Cristal —dijo el señor Cohen—. Tuve mucho trabajo para cuidar de madre; podían haberla estrujado, aunque por entonces era casi tan fuerte como ahora. Me dije que si tuviera cien madres nunca llevaría a ninguna de ellas a ver otra vez al Emperador y a la Emperatriz al Palacio de Cristal; y ya puede ver que un hombre no se lo puede permitir si solo tiene una madre, a menos que tenga un seguro enorme por ella. —Acarició el hombro de su madre afectuosamente, y soltó una pequeña risa por su propio humor.

—Su madre ha sido viuda por mucho tiempo, tal vez —dijo Deronda, aprovechando la oportunidad—. Por eso sus cuidados se han hecho más necesarios.

—Ay, ay, han pasado ya muchos *yore-zeit*[166] desde los que me ocupo de ella y de mí mismo —dijo Cohen rápidamente—. Empecé pronto. Es lo que te hace ser punzante como una navaja.

—¿Qué es lo que te hace ser punzante como una navaja, padre? —dijo Jacob, con la boca llena de pastel.

El padre guiñó a su invitado y dijo:

—Poner la otra mejilla.

Jacob se deslizó de su silla con un trozo de pastel en la mano, y acercándose a Mardoqueo, que hasta entonces había permanecido en absoluto silencio, dijo:

—¿Qué significa eso, poner la otra mejilla?

—Significa que vas a soportar que te hagan daño sin quejarte —dijo Mardoqueo, volviendo con bondad sus ojos sobre el pequeño rostro cercano al suyo. Jacob puso la punta de su pastel en la boca de Mardoqueo invitándole a morderlo, a la vez que dijo—: Eso no lo haré yo —y estuvo observando su pastel para ver qué parte de él perdía en ese acto de generosidad. Mardoqueo dio un mordisco y sonrió, sin duda queriendo satisfacer al chico, y el pequeño incidente hizo que ambos parecieran más adorables. Deronda, no obstante, pensaba, algo molesto, que no había sacado mucho de su pregunta.

—Me imagino que este es el barrio ideal para aprender —dijo, dando continuidad al tema para tener una excusa para dirigirse a Mardoqueo, a quien se volvió y dijo—: Usted ha sido un gran estudiante, supongo.

—He estudiado —fue la respuesta tranquila—. ¿Y usted? Usted sabe alemán, por el libro que compró.

—Sí, he estudiado en Alemania. ¿Está usted contratado para vender libros? —dijo Deronda.

—No; solo voy a la tienda del señor Ram cada día para vigilarla en los tiempos de las comidas —señaló Mardoqueo, que había reavivado su interés inicial con el que había mirado a Deronda: daba la sensación de que su rostro tenía un interés especial para él que neutralizaba la anterior decepción. Tras una pequeña pausa, dijo—: Tal vez sepa usted hebreo.

—Lamento decir que no.

Mardoqueo bajó su rostro: inclinó hacia abajo sus párpados, mirándose las manos, que estaban cruzadas ante él, y ya no dijo nada más. Deronda se había dado cuenta de forma más evidente que en su anterior encuentro que le costaba respirar, lo que pensó debía ser una señal de agotamiento.

—Yo he tenido que hacer otras cosas que aprender de los libros —dijo el señor Cohen—; he tenido que aprender cosas útiles. Conozco bien las piedras —y señaló el anillo de Deronda—. No temo equivocarme al valorar ese anillo. Pero, en fin —añadió, calmando su voz, y pasando a ser más baja, familiar y nasal—, ¿cuánto quiere por él?

—Cincuenta o sesenta libras —contestó Deronda, sin darle mucha importancia.

Cohen hizo una pausa, se llevó las manos a los bolsillos, fijó sus ojos brillantes sobre Deronda como si fuera un conejillo de indias, y dijo:

—No puedo hacerle eso. Me gustaría complacerle, pero no llego a esas cantidades. Cuarenta libras, digamos cuarenta, le daré a usted cuarenta libras por él.

Deronda era consciente de que Mardoqueo había levantado la vista de nuevo ante las palabras que se referían al asunto económico, y estaba examinándole de nuevo, mientras dijo:

—Muy bien, lo redimiré en un mes o así.

—Bueno. Ya le haré el recibo dentro de un rato —dijo Cohen con indiferencia. Luego levantó un dedo en señal de que debía aplazarse la conversación. Él, Mardoqueo y Jacob se pusieron los sombreros, y Cohen empezó una acción de gracias, que fue seguida por las respuestas, hasta que Mardoqueo continuó solo, cantando una melodía solemne, con su barbilla ligeramente inclinada hacia arriba y sus manos delgadas cruzadas frente a su pecho. No solo en su acento y en su tono, sino también en su despreocupación por conseguir la aprobación de los demás, se notaba un gran contraste con el judío que estaba al otro lado de la mesa. Era un encuentro inexplicable la presencia entre este tipo de tenderos prósperos y ordinarios, de un hombre

que, en su condición demacrada y extenuada, impusiera cierto sobrecogimiento en Deronda, y cierta incomodidad por no estar a su altura.

Tan pronto como Mardoqueo hubo terminado su arrebato devoto, se levantó, hizo una ligera inclinación de cabeza hacia el forastero, volvió hacia su habitación y cerró la puerta tras él.

—Ese parece ser un hombre remarcable —dijo Deronda, dirigiéndose a Cohen, que inmediatamente se encogió de hombros, sacó un poco la lengua y se dio unos golpecitos en la frente. Estaba dando claramente a entender que el juicio de Mardoqueo no llegaba al estándar que el señor Cohen consideraba a su modo de ver.

—¿Pertenece a su familia? —dijo Deronda.

La idea les pareció más bien ridícula tanto a las mujeres como a Cohen, y la familia intercambió miradas de diversión.

—No, no —dijo Cohen—. ¡Caridad! ¡Caridad! Trabajaba para mí, y a medida que se iba debilitando lo traje aquí. Es un estorbo, pero trae consigo una bendición, y enseña al chico. Además, repara los relojes y la joyería.

Deronda apenas se privó de sonreír ante esta mezcla de amabilidad y el deseo de justificarla a la luz de una compensación; pero su pretensión de seguir hablando de Mardoqueo, cuyo carácter resultaba aún más enigmático al saber estos nuevos detalles, fue contrariada. El señor Cohen enseguida abandonó el tema y regresó al de la «acomodación», que era también un acto de caridad, y se dispuso a sacar el recibo, cogió las cuarenta libras, y le presentó ambas cosas a cambio del anillo de diamantes. Deronda, considerando que sería bastante delicado prolongar su visita más allá del acuerdo sobre el negocio que había sido su pretexto, tuvo que marcharse, sin más resultados que el avance de cuarenta libras y el recibo del préstamo en el bolsillo de su chaleco, para tener una razón para volver cuando regresara al pueblo después de Navidad. Había decidido que entonces haría lo posible para adentrarse un poco más en el carácter e historia de Mardoqueo, de quien podía obtener algo más decisivo sobre los Cohen —por ejemplo, la razón por la que estaba prohibido preguntar a la señora Cohen mayor si tenía una hija.

FIN DEL SEGUNDO VOLUMEN

Que tu principal terror sea el de tu alma:
allí entre la aglomeración de acelerados deseos
que pisotean a los muertos apoderándose de su botín,
acecha la venganza, sin fundamento, irresistible,
como exhalacions cargadas de muerte lenta,
y sobre el escuadrón más limpio de recónditas alegrías,
se respira pálida pestilencia.

LIBRO V

Mardoqueo

Capítulo 35

> Si la inquietud de conciencia se midiera por el número de crímenes, la historia humana habría sido diferente, y uno miraría a los conspiradores de las guerras codiciosas y a los poderosos maleantes del mercado monetario como parte del mismo grupo de hombres arrepentidos que el salteador de caminos más miserable, o el ladrón de carteras, o el asesino que produce su carnicería con sus propias manos. Sin duda, la maldad también reparte sus recompensas; pero el que gana en el juego del mal tiene que ser más perverso, más cruel y más brutal que lo permitido por el orden de este planeta para todo el que nace de mujer, pues la mayoría de hombres llevan consigo una forma de conciencia —un temor que es la sombra de la justicia, una compasión que es la sombra del amor—, que les impide disfrutar de la recompensa de la maldad impávida, algo muy difícil de mantener por nuestra naturaleza compuesta.

El 29 de diciembre Deronda supo que los Grandcourt habían llegado a la Abadía, pero no les vio el pelo antes de ir a vestirse para comer. Había caído una gran cantidad de nieve, permitiendo al grupo de chicos el raro placer de tirarse bolas de nieve y construir muñecos de nieve, y en las vacaciones de Navidad las niñas de los Mallinger no se contentaban con ninguna diversión en la que no participara su «primo», como siempre llamaban a Deronda. Tras esos esfuerzos al aire libre había estado jugando al billar, y así las horas se habían pasado sin pensar en absoluto en la perspectiva de encontrarse con Gwendolen para comer. No obstante, esa perspectiva le resultaba interesante, y cuando ya estaba algo cansado y acalorado por tanta actividad, antes de que sonase el timbre que avisara de que faltaba media hora, empezó a pensar en ello especulando en cómo le habría influenciado a ella su matrimonio con Grandcourt, y en la probabilidad de que hubieran cambios discernibles en su comportamiento desde que la vio en Diplow, de la misma forma en que los hubo desde su primer encuentro con ella en Leubronn.

«Imagino que hay caracteres que uno puede ver crecer o degenerarse cada día, si uno los observase», fue su pensamiento. «Supongo que algunos de nosotros van más rápido que el resto; y creo que ella es una criatura que muestra todavía las marcas de algo que la impresionó hace tiempo. Ese pequeño asunto del collar, y la idea de que alguien pensara que hizo mal apostando, obviamente le había picado. Pero tal impresionabilidad puede tomar dos caminos: tanto puede conducir a uno a la desesperación como a decidirse mejorar. Y por mucha fascinación que puedan suscitar los gustos caprichosos de Grandcourt, ¡por Dios!, ¿quién creerá que mostrará un tierno

afecto en la compañía del día a día? Cualquiera estaría tentado a fustigarle para que mostrara algo de pasión en su rostro y en su conversación. Me temo que ella se casó con él por ambición, para escapar de la pobreza. ¿Pero por qué se escapó de él la primera vez? La pobreza vino luego, de todas formas. ¡Pobrecilla! Puede que le hayan convencido a que lo haga. ¿Qué se puede sentir sino pena por una joven criatura como esa, sin experiencia alguna en la vida, imprudente sin saberlo, depositando todas sus ciegas esperanzas en ese despojo humano?».

Sin duda, los apelativos que aplicaba Deronda en su meditación al marido eran tanto menos halagüeños en cuanto disculpaba por lástima a la mujer. Su noción de Grandcourt como «despojo» no estaba fundada sobre ningún conocimiento en particular, sino simplemente en la impresión que le había dado, a partir de una relación ordinaria y cortés con él, que Grandcourt había malgastado todo su sano interés en las cosas materiales.

En general, puede estarse seguro que siempre que tiene lugar un matrimonio de cualquier clase, los conocidos del género masculino van a compadecer probablemente a la mujer, y los del femenino al marido; se piensa que hay uno que lo ha hecho mejor que el otro; y especialmente, cuando la mujer es encantadora, los caballeros jóvenes concluyen que ella no puede sentir un cariño real por un compañero tan aburrido para ellos como su marido, sino que se ha casado por otros motivos. ¿Quién es el que en tales circunstancias se compadece del marido? Incluso las amigas de él van a pensar que su suposición es merecida: debería haber escogido a otra. Pero tal vez haya que excusar a Deronda que no sintiera nada de lástima por Grandcourt, que nunca daba la impresión a sus conocidos de causarles más sufrimiento del que realmente les infligía; mientras que a Gwendolen, joven, precipitada, ávida de felicidad, alimentada con los halagos que hacen creer a una joven hermosa en su derecho divino a hacer las cosas a su gusto, ¡qué rápido puede pasar la vida de magníficas expectativas a una sensación amarga de haber hecho algo irremediable! Después de lo que había visto de ella, sería muy insensible por su parte si no estuviera deseando con cierto interés que entrara en la sala. Con todo, como ya habían pasado tres semanas desde la luna de miel y Gwendolen había sido entronada no solo en Ryelands, sino también en Diplow, probablemente ya habría tenido tiempo de componer su rostro manifestando u ocultando lo que creyese conveniente, pues no era una persona que dejara expuestos sus sentimientos a la vista de cualquier curioso.

Se había invitado a un grupo bastante variado para encontrarse con la nueva pareja: la vieja aristocracia estaba representada por Lord y Lady Pentreath; el viejo señorío por el señor y la señora Fitzadam de la rama Worcestershire de los Fitzadam; la política y el orden público por el señor Fenn, vocal de West Orchards, acompañado de sus dos hijas; la familia de Lady Mallinger por su hermano, el señor Raymond, y su mujer; el útil elemento soltero, por el señor Sinker, el eminente consejero; y por el señor Vandernoodt, con quien había trabado tan buena amistad en Leubronn como para mantenerla en Inglaterra.

Todos se habían reunido en la sala de estar antes de que apareciera la nueva pareja. Mientras tanto pasaban el tiempo observando a los niños —algunos Raymond pequeños, sobrinos y sobrinas de Lady Mallinger, además de sus propias tres hijas, a quienes se les permitía siempre estar por ahí a esas horas—. La escena era realmente encantadora: magnificada por retratos de cuerpo entero enmarcados en paisajes profundos, colgados en las paredes revestidas de paneles de cedro; vigilada por un techo que brillaba con los ricos colores que lo cubrían entre los brazos de las lámparas; iluminada casi tanto por el fuego intenso que desprendían las ramas de los robles como por las pálidas velas de cera; pacificada por gruesas alfombras y tapices decorados con caballos de pura raza inglesa que atenuaban cualquier sonido; y la mezcla de edad, desde los señores Pentreath de pelo blanco, al niño de cuatro años Edgar Raymond, añadía un encanto variado a los grupos humanos. Lady Mallinger, con sus formas redondas propias de una matrona y sus ojos azules ligeramente prominentes, se paseaba exhibiendo su vestido de terciopelo negro, con un perrito blanco en sus brazos a modo de prolongación de su vestimenta; los niños estaban repartidos entre las señoras, mientras que la mayoría de los caballeros permanecían de pie algo apartados conversando con esa vivacidad moderada que se observa durante los largos minutos que preceden a la comida. Deronda estaba un poco apartado del círculo principal, entretenido en un diálogo forzoso que le había sido impuesto por el señor Vandernoodt, un hombre de la mejor sangre holandesa importada en tiempos de la revolución; por lo demás, era una de esas personas del todo conveniente que estuviesen presentes en sociedad, que no son nada en particular por sí mismas, pero que todo el mundo cree que están relacionadas con lo mejor de cada tema; de pelo corto, ojos pálidos, despreocupado, ofrecía el mejor contraste posible con el color intenso y la seriedad viva de Deronda.

Hablaba de los recién casados, a quienes esperaban ver aparecer. El señor Vandernoodt era un recolector afanoso de detalles personales, y podría decirlo prácticamente todo de cualquier gran filósofo o físico, salvo sus teorías o sus descubrimientos; en esos momentos estaba dando a entender que había aprendido muchas cosas de Grandcourt desde su encuentro con él en Leubronn.

—Los hombres que han visto mucho de la vida no siempre terminan escogiendo tan bien a sus mujeres. Él ha tenido una historia anecdótica, ha ido demasiado lejos en sus aventuras, creo, a pesar de ser un poco parado. Pero, por supuesto, usted lo sabe todo sobre él.

—No, de verdad —dijo Deronda, en un tono indiferente—. Sé poco más de él que es el sobrino de Sir Hugo.

Pero entonces se abrió la puerta, dejando para más adelante cualquier satisfacción que pudiera derivarse de la comunicación del señor Vandernoodt.

La escena era propicia para destacar cualquier figura distinguida que entrase por esa puerta, y ciertamente, cuando el señor y la señora Grandcourt entraron, ningún observador podía negar que sus figuras tenían distinción. El marido no podía estar más perfectamente vestido, ni mostrar su rostro una mayor impasibilidad, que la que tenía antes de casarse. Debía suponerse que no iba a conformarse con lo que no fuera la mejor equitación, mujer incluida; y la mujer que se apoyaba en su brazo era la que se había esperado de él que escogiera.

—¡Por el rey Jorge, creo que es más hermosa que cualquier cosa! —exclamó el señor Vandernoodt. Y Deronda opinaba lo mismo, aunque no dijo nada.

La seda blanca y los diamantes —puede parecer extraño, pero llevaba diamantes en el cuello, en las orejas, en el pelo—, seguramente tenían algo que ver con su nueva e imponente belleza, que le apareció como incuestionable si no más plenamente satisfactoria que la primera vez que la vio en la tabla de apuestas. Algunos rostros que tienen una belleza peculiar son como las obras de arte originales: la primera vez siempre se miran con recelo. Pero al ver a Gwendolen en Diplow, Deronda había visto en ella más de lo que puede esperarse de ese encanto seductor y tierno que llamamos femenino. ¿Hubo algún cambio desde entonces? Desconfiaba de sus impresiones; pero cuando vio sus saludos con lo que parecía una calma fría y orgullosa y una sonrisa superficial, pensó que estaba operando en ella la misma fuerza demoníaca que la poseyó cuando la sorprendió con esa mirada

decidida que tenía cuando abandonó la tabla del juego como perdedora. No quedaba tiempo para sacar más conclusiones —no quedaba incluso tiempo para saludarla antes de que sonara la convocatoria para la comida—.

No se sentó muy lejos, quedando a poca distancia en frente de ella en la mesa, y a veces podía oír las respuestas que daba a Sir Hugo, que estaba encantado de conversar con ella; pero aunque la estaba mirando con la intención de saludarla con una inclinación de cabeza, ella no le dio oportunidad de hacerlo durante algún tiempo. Al final, Sir Hugo, que debía de haber imaginado que ya se habían dicho alguna cosa, dijo:

—Deronda, te gustará oír lo que me está contando la señora Grandcourt sobre unos de tus personajes predilectos: Klesmer.

Gwendolen había bajado los ojos, y Deronda, que la estaba mirando, pensó discernir una desgana temblorosa mientra se veía obligada a levantarlos y devolver su inclinación de cabeza natural y su sonrisa, siendo la de ella solamente un ligero movimiento de los labios. Fue solo un instante, y Sir Hugo continuó sin detenerse:

—Los Arrowpoint han acabado aceptando el matrimonio, y él está pasando las navidades con su mujer en Quetcham.

—Supongo que estará contento por su mujer, aunque creo que no le habría importado mantenerse a distancia de sus familiares —dijo Deronda.

—Es una especie de historia trovadoresca —dijo Lady Pentreath, una señora mayor, sencilla y de voz profunda—; me alegro de hallar un pequeño romance entre nosotros. Creo que nuestra gente joven de ahora se está volviendo demasiado conocedora del mundo.

—Es una muestra del sentido común de los Arrowpoint, no obstante, el que hayan aceptado el asunto, después del alboroto en los periódicos —dijo Sir Hugo—. Y repudiar a tu única hija por haber escogido una pareja de rango inferior es algo así como repudiar tu propio ojo: todo el mundo sabe que es tuyo, y no tienes otro con el que aparecer.

—En cuanto a la pareja de rango inferior, ninguno de los dos tiene sangre de la nobleza en sus venas —dijo Lady Pentreath—. El viejo Almirante Arrowpoint era uno de los hombres de Nelson, ya sabe, el hijo de un doctor. Y todos sabemos cómo hizo dinero la madre.

—Si hablamos de que uno de los dos se ha rebajado para casarse con el otro, yo casi diría que ha sido más bien Klesmer —dijo Deronda.

—Ah, tú crees que es un caso en el que el inmortal se ha casado con la mortal. ¿Cuál es su opinión? —dijo Sir Hugo, mirando a Gwendolen.

—No me cabe la menor duda de que Klesmer se considera inmortal. Pero me atrevería a decir que su mujer está dispuesta a adorarle todo lo que él lo requiera —dijo Gwendolen. Había recobrado la compostura que pudiera haber perdido.

—¿No le parece bien que una mujer adore a su marido? —dijo Sir Hugo, con aire divertido.

—Oh, sí —dijo Gwendolen—, si eso hiciera que los demás creyeran en él. —Hizo una breve pausa y luego continuó con más alborozo—: Cuando Herr Klesmer admire su propio genio, la situación será menos absurda si su mujer dice amén.

—Por lo que veo, no le cae muy bien Klesmer —dijo Sir Hugo.

—Le valoro muchísimo, se lo aseguro —dijo Gwendolen—. Su genio está por encima de mi opinión, y sé que es extremadamente generoso.

Habló con la seriedad repentina con la que se suele corregir un comentario injusto o indiscreto, pues no podía justificar la antipatía que sentía hacia Klesmer en el fondo de su corazón. Deronda se estaba preguntando qué habría pensado de ella si nunca hubiera oído hablar de ella con anterioridad: probablemente que se mostraba dura y desafiante con el fin de encubrir algún conocimiento doloroso —si, realmente, podía imaginársela de otra forma que no fuera a la luz de sus sospechas—. ¿Pero por qué no le trataba más amistosamente?

Sir Hugo, cambiando de tema, le dijo a ella:

—¿No es esta una sala preciosa? Era parte del refectorio de la Abadía. Había una división marcada por esos pilares y los tres arcos antes de que fueran levantados. La sala era la mitad de larga en su origen. Había una hilera de benedictinos sentados donde estamos ahora. ¡Imaginad que de repente viéramos reducirse la intensidad de las luces y levantarse detrás de nuestras sillas los fantasmas de los viejos monjes!

—¡Por favor, no! —dijo Gwendolen, estremeciéndose divertida—. Está muy bien eso de ir en busca de antepasados y monjes, pero deberían saber cuál es su sitio y permanecer bajo el suelo. Me asustaría tener que andar sola por esta casa. Supongo que las viejas generaciones deben estar enfadadas con nosotros por haber cambiado tanto las cosas.

—Oh, los fantasmas deben ser de todos los partidos políticos —dijo Sir Hugo—. Y aquellos que quisieron cambiar las cosas mientras vivían y no pudieron deben estar de nuestro lado. Pero si no le gusta pasearse sola por la casa, le gustará hacerlo acompañada, espero. Usted y Grandcourt deberían

verlo todo. Y le pediremos a Deronda que venga con nosotros. Sabe más de ella que yo. —El baronet estaba de un humor de lo más complaciente.

Gwendolen lanzó una mirada furtiva a Deronda, que debía haber oído lo que dijo Sir Hugo, puesto que había vuelto su rostro hacia ellos, intentando entrar en la conversación; pero parecía tan impasible como una imagen. A la vista de que Deronda les enseñara a ella y a Grandcourt el lugar que iba a ser de ellos, y que ella recordaba amargamente que podía haber sido de él (tal vez, si otros, hubieran actuado de otra forma), le sobrevinieron ciertos pensamientos —pensamientos que a menudo se había imaginado, pero que ahora se repetían en una ocasión embarazosamente nueva—; y era consciente de que su mirada revelaba el embarazo y la torpeza que sentía, cosa que Sir Hugo debía haber notado. Acostumbrada a utilizar recursos rápidos para no delatarse, dijo jocosamente:

—Usted no sabe lo mucho que me atemoriza el señor Deronda.

—¿Cómo es eso? ¿Es porque piensa que sabe demasiado? —dijo Sir Hugo, a quien no se le había escapado la peculiaridad de su mirada.

—No. Es desde que le vi por primera vez en Leubronn. Porque cuando se acercó a mirar a la mesa de la ruleta, empecé a perder. Lanzó un mal de ojo a mis apuestas. No las aprobaba. Me le dijo después. Y ahora, cualquier cosa que haga ante él, temo que vuelva a echarle mal de ojo.

—¡Vaya! A mí mismo me da respeto cuando no aprueba algo —dijo Sir Hugo, mirando a Deronda; y luego, volviéndose hacia Gwendolen, dijo en voz baja—: no creo que a las mujeres en general les moleste que fije sus ojos en ellas. —La pequeña impertinencia a la que solía referirse el baronet le resultó en este momento tan molesta a Gwendolen como le resultaba a menudo a Deronda.

—Me molestan cualesquier ojos que sean críticos —dijo, en voz alta y distante, girando el cuello—. ¿Quedan muchas de estas habitaciones antiguas en la Abadía?

—No muchas. Hay un claustro en buen estado con una larga galería sobre él. Pero el patio más bonito de todos lo han convertido ahora en un establo. Forma parte de la antigua iglesia. Cuando hice reformas en el sitio, centré mis esfuerzos en lo demás; pero estaba fuera de mi alcance cambiar el establo, así que los caballos tienen el privilegio de estar en el antiguo y pulcro coro. Tiene que ir a verlo.

—Me gustaría ver tanto los caballos como el edificio —dijo Gwendolen.

—Oh, no tengo ningún semental del que hablar. Grandcourt mirará con desdén a mis caballos —dijo Sir Hugo—. Yo he dejado de ir de caza, y ahora voy al trote, como corresponde a un caballero de mi edad con hijas. El hecho es que continué haciendo mucho por este lugar. Vivimos dos años en Diplow mientras se hacían las reformas. ¿Le gusta Diplow?

—No especialmente —dijo Gwendolen, con indiferencia. Podría pensarse que la joven dama disponía de más sitios familiares a los que le importaba acudir.

—Ah, no ocurrirá lo mismo con Ryelands —dijo Sir Hugo, satisfecho—. Grandcourt, lo sé, lo tomó para cazar. Pero encontró algo mucho mejor allí —añadió el baronet, bajando la voz—, así que puede que lo prefiera más que ningún otro lugar en el mundo.

—Lo que me atrae del sitio —dijo Gwendolen, sin hacer mucho caso del cumplido más que con una fría sonrisa—, es que está al alcance de Offendene.

—Lo entiendo —dijo Sir Hugo, y dejó de lado el tema.

¿Qué baronet, por muy amable que sea, puede dejar de desear fuertemente una posesión particular? A Sir Hugo le habría gustado que Grandcourt, con o sin motivos, prefiriera cualquier otro sitio a Diplow; pero considerando que en el puro proceso del deseo siempre podemos hacer que las condiciones de nuestra satisfacción estén todas bien dispuestas, deseó que el conveniente desagrado de Grandcourt por Diplow no estuviera asociado con su matrimonio con esta mujer encantadora. Al baronet le gustaba mucho Gwendolen, pero como comentó luego a Lady Mallinger, no la consideraba una chica que se hubiera casado superando sus expectativas.

Deronda no había oído mucho de esta conversación, pues había puesto su atención en otro lugar, pero las breves impresiones que recibía del comportamiento de Gwendolen le convencieron de que este tenía algo nuevo y artificial.

Más tarde, en la sala de estar, Deronda, a petición de alguien, se sentó en el piano y cantó. Poco después, la señora Raymond ocupó su lugar; y al levantarse, él se dio cuenta de que Gwendolen había dejado su sitio y se había acercado a esta parte de la sala, como si quisiera escuchar más atentamente, pero permanecía de pie de espaladas a todo el mundo, aparentemente contemplando un hermoso busto encapuchado tallado en marfil que colgaba sobre una mesita. Anhelaba acercarse a ella y hablar. ¿Por qué no obedecía a su impulso, como hubiera hecho con cualquier otra dama de la sala? Con

todo, dudó unos momentos, observando el gracioso contorno de su espalda, pero sin moverse.

Si tienes alguna razón para no ceder ante el deseo de hablar con una mujer hermosa, es una mala decisión mirarla un buen rato por la espalda: el deseo de ver lo que oculta se hace más fuerte. Puede haber una dulce sonrisa al otro lado. Deronda acabó por dirigirse hacia la mesita, al lado de Gwendolen, pero antes de que pudiera hablar ella se había girado sin sonrisa alguna en su rostro, sino con una mirada tan llena de tristeza, tan absolutamente diferente de su esfuerzo por mostrarse distante en su reconocimiento en la mesa, que sus palabras se quedaron sin salir. Durante lo que fue un espacio de tiempo apreciable para ambos, que cualquier otra persona no habría considerado así, se miraron el uno al otro; ella parecía buscar el alivio de una confesión, él mostraba una profunda compasión que neutralizaba cualquier otro sentimiento.

—¿No se une a la música? —dijo, para poder empezar la conversación.

Que su mirada de confesión había sido involuntaria quedó claro por su estremecimiento perceptible y por su cambio de expresión con el que se volvió para contestarle tranquilamente:

—Me uno a ella escuchándola. Me encanta la música.

—Usted sabe de música, ¿verdad?

—He dedicado mucho tiempo a la música. Pero no tengo el talento suficiente como para conseguir que valga la pena. No cantaré nunca más.

—Pero si le encanta la música, siempre valdrá la pena practicar en privado, para su propio deleite. Yo he hecho una virtud de mi satisfacción con mi mediocridad —dijo Deronda, sonriendo—; siempre es perdonable, así que uno no le pide a los demás que lo tomen como signo de superioridad.

—Yo no le puedo imitar a usted —dijo Gwendolen, recobrando su tono de animosidad artificial—. Ser mediocre para mí es querer decir que se es aburrido. Y el peor defecto que encuentro a las cosas es que sean aburridas. ¿Sabe? Voy a justificar las apuestas a pesar de su opinión. Es un refugio contra el aburrimiento.

—No admito la justificación —dijo Deronda—. Creo que al considerar que las cosas son aburridas el problema está dentro nuestro. Si no, ¿cómo podría alguien encontrar un intenso interés en la vida? Y hay muchos que se lo encuentran.

—Ah, ya veo. El defecto que encuentro en el mundo es mi propio defecto —dijo Gwendolen, sonriéndole. Luego, tras un momento, mirando de nuevo

la entalladura de marfil, dijo—: ¿*Usted* nunca encuentra defectos en el mundo o en los demás?

—Oh, sí. Cuando estoy de un humor refunfuñón.

—¿Y odia a la gente? ¿Confiesa que los odia cuando se cruzan en su camino, cuando la ganancia de ellos es la pérdida de usted? Esa es su frase, ya sabe.

—A menudo estamos cruzándonos unos en los caminos de otros y no podemos evitarlo. Creo que es estúpido odiar a la gente por ese motivo.

—Pero ¿y se le hacen daño cuando podían haberlo evitado? —dijo Gwendolen, con gran intensidad, inexplicable en una conversación casual como esta.

Deronda se maravilló de los temas que ella escogía como conversación. Una impresión dolorosa frenó su respuesta por un momento, pero al final dijo, con una seria y profunda entonación:

—Vaya, si es así, después de todo, prefiero mi lugar al de ellos.

—En eso creo que tiene usted razón —dijo Gwendolen, con una repentina risita, y se volvió para unirse al grupo del piano.

Deronda miró buscando a Grandcourt, preguntándose si seguía los movimientos de su mujer con atención; pero no era de mucho sentido común suponer que pudiera averiguar ese hecho. Grandcourt tenía un modo engañoso de observar cualquier cosa que le interesara, que no superaba ni un animal de los que parecen estar dormidos cuando en realidad acechan a su presa. En esos momentos se hallaba hundido en un sillón, y le estaba hablando el señor Vandernoodt, que aparentemente consideraba que conocer a un marido de esas características era muy cultivador; y una persona incauta habría considerado seguro contar secretos delante de él, pues es un prejuicio común pensar que el observador rápido es el que mueve rápidamente sus ojos. Nada de eso. Si buscas un testigo respetable que no vea nada inconveniente, escoge a un caballero vivaz, muy en alerta, con los ojos bien abiertos, y un monóculo en uno de ellos y con imparcialidad completa respecto al propósito de lo que observa. Si Grandcourt quería tener a alguien bajo control, lo miraba de reojo, gracias a sus largos ojos estrechos, y si se ponía detrás de él, mediante un proceso constructivo lograba saber qué es lo que hacía allí. Sabía perfectamente dónde estaba su mujer y cómo se estaba comportando. ¿Iba a ser un marido celoso? Deronda imaginaba que era probable. Pero su imaginación iba tan desencaminada respecto a Grandcourt como habría ido respecto a un continente inexplorado donde todas las especies eran peculiares.

No se concebía a sí mismo como un sujeto probable de celos, o que pudiera dar ningún pretexto para ellos; pero la sospecha de que una mujer no es feliz le lleva naturalmente a uno a especular sobre el comportamiento privado del marido; y Deronda se vio a la una de la madrugada pasadas en la más que ridícula situación de estar sentado con una gramática hebrea en sus manos (pues de algún modo, por deferencia a Mardoqueo, había empezado a estudiar hebreo) con la conciencia de haber estado cerca de una hora en esa actitud y de no haber estado pensando en nada más que en Gwendolen y en su marido. Ser un joven inusual significa sobre todo lograr un difícil control sobre lo usual, que a menudo es como empaquetar tus cosas para escapar del duendecillo de la mala suerte y verlo luego haciéndote muecas encima del coche de equipajes. Las peculiaridades del carácter de Deronda habían sido agudamente conmovidas por los breves incidentes y las palabras de toda la historia de su relación con Gwendolen; y la breve aportación de esta noche le había provocado una reaparición inoportuna. No era vanidad —era más bien compasión lo que le había atraído de su comportamiento hacia él—; y la dificultad con la que parecía haber elevado sus ojos para saludarle, al primer momento, la interpretaba ahora por esa mirada inconfundible de confianza involuntaria que ella había depositado luego en él cuando le vio acercarse.

«¿Y de qué sirve todo esto?», pensó Deronda, mientras lanzaba su gramática, y comenzaba a desvestirse. «No puedo hacer nada para ayudarla, nadie puede, si ella ya se ha dado cuenta de su error. Y me parece que lamentablemente ella no sabe lo que la puede ayudar. Es extraño y da pena pensar cuánta miseria puede acumular una criatura bella y delicada como esa, vestida con ropa elegante, con gemas colgando de sus orejas, su cabeza erguida con orgullo, su boca mostrando sonrisas fingidas, ¡y su pobre alma asqueada de todo! ¿Pero qué es lo que sé de ella? Tiene que haber un demonio dentro de ella para unirse al peor de los maridos posibles, por lo que puedo decir. Claramente fue una niña mal educada y mundana: tal vez sea una coqueta».

La última reflexión, que no creía demasiado, era una dosis autoadministrada de cautela, sugerida en parte por las bromas despectivas de Sir Hugo sobre el tema del flirteo. Deronda decidió no ofrecerse para ningún cara a cara con Gwendolen durante los pocos días de su estancia en la Abadía; y fue capaz de mantenerse en su resolución a pesar de sus fuertes deseos de contradecirla.

Pero un hombre no puede decidir las acciones de una mujer, y menos aún las de una mujer como Gwendolen, cuya naturaleza combinaba una reserva orgullosa con los arrebatos, el terror que la paralizaba con el desafío, que podían alternarse indistintamente y hacer desaparecer su control. Pocas palabras podían representarla tan lejos de la realidad como «coqueta». Tenía un amor natural por el homenaje, y creía en su propio poder; pero de ningún modo creía que podía utilizar artificios para esclavizar a nadie; y el convencimiento del propio poder de esta pobre criatura, junto con sus otros sueños antes de casarse, tenía que dejarlos a un lado ahora como los juguetes de un niño enfermo, a los cuales mira con ojos tristes, y no es capaz de jugar con ellos, por mucho que lo intente.

Al día siguiente, en el almuerzo, Sir Hugo le dijo a ella:

—El hielo se ha marchado como por arte de magia, y es tan agradable estar afuera ahora… ¿vamos a ver el establo y los demás rincones del lugar?

—Sí, se lo ruego —dijo Gwendolen—. ¿Querrás ver los establos Henleigh? —añadió, mirando a su marido.

—Como excepción —dijo Grandcourt, con una indiferencia que parecía añadir ironía a sus palabras, mientras se volvió para mirarla. Era la primera vez que Deronda los vio hablar el uno al otro desde su llegada, y pensó que su intercambio de miradas era tan frío y oficial como si hubiera pertenecido a una ceremonia de establecimiento de estatutos. Aún así, la afición inglesa a la reserva explica muchas de sus negaciones; y de las maneras de Grandcourt, que incluyen un velo extra de reserva, se espera que representen la parte extrema del gusto nacional.

—¿A quién más le apetece recorrer la casa y sus dependencias? —dijo Sir Hugo—. Las mujeres tendrán que taparse bien: tenemos el tiempo justo para hacerlo antes de que se ponga el sol. Tú vendrás, ¿no, Dan?

—Oh, sí, dijo Deronda, despreocupadamente, sabiendo que Sir Hugo se tomaría mal cualquier excusa.

—Entonces quedamos todos en la biblioteca, cuando todo el mundo esté listo, digamos, en media hora —dijo el baronet. Gwendolen se preparó increíblemente rápido, y en diez minutos bajó a la biblioteca con sus cebellinas, sus penachos y sus pequeñas botas prietas. Nada más entrar en la sala se dio cuenta que había alguien más allí: era precisamente lo que había esperado. Deronda estaba de pie de espaldas a ella en la otra punta de la sala, y estaba ojeando un periódico. ¿Cómo iba a conseguir hacer ruido con sus pequeñas botas sobre la alfombra de Axminster?[167]. Y toser un poco habría

parecido una señal intencionada que su orgullo no estaba dispuesto a conceder; también le daba vergüenza acercarse a él y hacerle saber que estaba allí, a pesar de que eran sus ganas de hablar con él la que le había hecho imaginar la posibilidad de encontrarle, y se había apresurado a bajar, igual que los pájaros que revolotean cerca del agua sin atreverse a beberla. Siempre había estado intranquila sobre la opinión que él tenía de ella, pero hoy sentía una ansiedad especial, no fuera a pensar de ella con desdén, siendo como era consciente de haber triunfado, de ser la mujer de Grandcourt, la futura mujer de estos parajes. Era habitual en ella magnificar las satisfacciones de su orgullo, sobre el que se basaba su fuerza; pero de alguna manera, que Deronda estuviera allí lo estropeaba todo. No había ni la más ligera intención de coquetería en su actitud hacia él; para ella, era único entre los demás hombres, puesto que la había impresionado que no fuera su admirador, sino su superior: de una forma misteriosa, él estaba formando parte de su conciencia, de igual forma que una mujer cuya naturaleza es objeto de una creencia reverencial puede convertirse en una nueva conciencia para un hombre.

¡Y ahora no miraba alrededor ni se daba cuenta de que ella estaba allí! El periódico crujió en sus manos, levantó la cabeza y volvió a enfrascarse en la lectura de esas estúpidas columnas; evidentemente se acariciaba la barba, como si los temas del mundo fueran cosa fácil para él. Por supuesto, el resto del grupo estaría pronto abajo, y su oportunidad de decir algo que borrara la imagen frívola de la noche anterior se habría esfumado. Le irritó profundamente —pues las jóvenes criaturas como ella enseguida absorben el sufrimiento a través de los succionadores invisibles de su propia fantasía—, y su rostro adoptó esa expresión peculiar que trae consigo una mortificación en la que las lágrimas están prohibidas.

Al fin, dejó el periódico a un lado y se volvió.

—Oh, ya está usted aquí —dijo, acercándose uno o dos pasos—. Debo ir a por mi sombrero.

Se volvió a un lado y salió de la habitación. Era un comportamiento bastante descortés. Solo por educación debía haber intercambiado algunas palabras antes de dejarla sola. De todas formas, Grandcourt se presentó con Sir Hugo inmediatamente después, así que las palabras tendrían que haber sido tan breves que no habría valido la pena. De hecho, le vieron marcharse desde la puerta de la biblioteca.

—Eh… pareces algo enferma —dijo Grandcourt, yendo directo hacia ella, y quedándose enfrente, la miró a los ojos—: ¿Sigues queriendo ir de paseo?

—Sí, me encantaría —dijo Gwendolen, sin el menor movimiento a excepción del de sus labios.

—Podríamos posponer ir por dentro de la casa, ya sabe, y visitar solo las afueras —dijo Sir Hugo, amablemente, mientras Grandcourt se hacía a un lado.

—¡Oh, no querido! —dijo Gwendolen, hablando con determinación— no pospongamos nada. Quiero un largo paseo.

El resto del grupo que se iba a unir al paseo —dos damas y dos caballeros además de Deronda— habían llegado ya; y Gwendolen, reanimándose, se acercó con regocijo al lado de Sir Hugo, aparentemente atendiendo de igual forma los comentarios que le habían pedido a Deronda que hiciera sobre varios fragmentos arquitectónicos, así como las razones de Sir Hugo para no haber puesto remedio a la mezcla de lo moderno no disimulado y lo antiguo —que en su opinión contribuía a hacer el sitio más verdaderamente histórico. En su camino a la despensa y a la cocina, salieron un momento de la casa y se pararon ante un hermoso portal apuntado, único vestigio del ala este.

—Bueno, para mí —dijo Sir Hugo—, es más interesante que esto esté en medio de lo que claramente es cuatro siglos posteriores, que no que el portal entero hubiera sido construido como si aparentemente fuera todo del siglo trece. Los añadidos deben hacer ver en qué época fueron hechos y llevar el sello de su periodo. Yo no destrozaría nada de lo antiguo, pero esa idea de reproducir lo antiguo me parece un error. En fin, si un hombre quiere hacerlo debe pagar por su capricho. Además, ¿a dónde iríamos a parar haciendo ventanillas por donde nadie quiere mirar, y otras cosas por el estilo? Me pueden pedir también que desgaste las piedras al arrodillarme, ¿verdad, Grandcourt?

—Un enorme fastidio —dijo Grandcourt lentamente—. Odio los tipos que les gusta aullar letanías, se hacen verdaderamente pesados.

—Bueno, sí, a eso es a lo que les conduce su romanticismo —dijo Sir Hugo, en un tono de asentimiento confidencial—, es decir, si lo llevan a cabo de forma lógica.

—Creo que esa forma de razonar contra un sentido porque pueda ser reducido al absurdo nos llevaría pronto a estancarnos en la vida —dijo Deronda—. No es la lógica de la acción humana; es como hacer carne en una barbacoa, que una vez has empezado ya no puedes dejar de darle vueltas. No podemos hacer nada de forma segura sin preguntarnos antes a dónde vamos a parar.

—Yo creo que «la regla del bolsillo»[168] es el mejor indicador —dijo Sir Hugo, riendo—. Y para hacer estos edificios nuevos que parecen viejos, tienes que contratar hombres que rasquen y lo desportillen todo artísticamente para darle un aspecto de superficie antigua, cosa que tal como está la mano de obra hoy en día no hay ni que hablar.

—¿Le gusta mantener las viejas modas, entonces, señor Deronda? —dijo Gwendolen, aprovechando la libertad que daba el grupo de retrasarse un poco, mientras Sir Hugo y Grandcourt proseguían.

—Algunas de ellas. No veo por qué no podemos elegir qué hacer como lo hacemos con otros temas, o por qué la edad o la novedad en sí misma es una razón a favor o en contra. Deleitarse en hacer cosas porque nuestros padres las hacían es bueno si no cierra la puerta a nada mejor; aumenta el rango de nuestro afecto, y el afecto es la base más sólida para hacer el bien en la vida.

—¿Eso piensa? —dijo Gwendolen, un poco sorprendida—. Habría dicho que a usted le importaban más las ideas, el conocimiento, la sabiduría y todo eso.

—Pero que a uno le importen esas cosas es una forma de afecto —dijo Deronda, sonriendo ante su súbita ingenuidad—. Llámelo apego, interés, complacencia, querer sufrir un poco para poder dedicar nuestro tiempo a esas cosas e impedir que se perjudiquen. Por supuesto hay una diferencia si los objetos de interés son seres humanos; pero generalmente, en cualquier afecto profundo, los objetos son una mezcla, algo de personas y algo de ideas, sentimientos y afectos fluyen juntos.

—No sé si entiendo muy bien eso —dijo Gwendolen, elevando su mentón como solía hacer, con descaro—. Creo que yo no soy muy afectuosa; tal vez esté usted diciéndome que esa es la razón por la que no veo mucho bien en la vida.

—No, no estoy diciéndole eso; pero admito que pensaría que es verdad si creyera lo que me dice de usted misma —dijo Deronda, seriamente.

En esto, Sir Hugo y Grandcourt se volvieron y se pararon.

—Nunca consigo que el señor Deronda me haga un cumplido —dijo Gwendolen—. Tengo curiosidad por saber si se le pueden sacar unos pocos halagos.

—¡Ah! —dijo Sir Hugo, mirando a Deronda—, el hecho es que es inútil lisonjear a una novia que se ha casado. Acabamos desesperados. Ha estado tan envuelta de dulces piropos que todo lo demás que decimos le parece insulso.

—Del todo cierto —dijo Gwendolen, encorvando la cabeza y sonriendo —. El señor Grandcourt me ganó gracias a sus cumplidos precisos. Si hubiera habido una sola palabra fuera de lugar habría sido fatal.

—¿Oye eso? —dijo Sir Hugo, mirando al marido.

—Sí —dijo Grandcourt, sin cambiar de expresión—. De todas formas, es endemoniadamente difícil mantener el nivel.

Todo esto le parecía a Sir Hugo un juego natural entre un marido y una mujer así; pero Deronda se preguntaba por los cambios desorientadores del comportamiento de Gwendolen, que a ratos parecía despertar compasión por su indiscreción infantil, y a otros la rechazaba por su forma orgullosa de encerrarse en sí misma. Intentó mantenerse lejos de ella dedicándose a la señorita Juliet Fenn, una jovencita cuyo perfil había sido tan desfavorablemente marcado por circunstancias que no podía controlar, que hace unos meses Gwendolen había considerado imposible estar celosa de ella. Sin embargo, cuando estaban viendo la cocina —una parte del edificio original perfectamente conservada—, la profundidad de las sombras en los nichos de las paredes de piedra y en las aristas de las bóvedas, el juego de luces que el fuego intenso provocaba en los limpios cacharros de estaño, cobre y latón, la agradable resonancia que devolvía cada sonido, ya fuera de una voz humana o de metal, quedaron desvirtuados para Gwendolen, y los comentarios de Sir Hugo sobre ellos le resultaron más bien importunos, puesto que Deronda estaba hablando con otras damas y se mantenía lejos de ella. No tenía importancia alguna que los demás caballeros aprovecharan la oportunidad de estar cerca de ella: ¿de qué le servía su admiración mientras tuviera la sensación desagradable que según el modo de ver las cosas de Deronda, ella ocupaba una posición insignificante? El señor Vandernoodt, que tenía siempre la manía de describir una cosa mientras estaban mirando otra, resultaba casi insoportable con su insistencia en la cocina de Lord Blough, que había visto en el norte.

—Le ruego no nos pida ver dos cocinas a la vez. El calor es el doble. De verdad que tengo que salir —gritó al fin, saliendo resueltamente al aire libre, y dejando a los demás a la zaga. Grandcourt también salió y le dijo cuando ella se acercó a él:

—Me pregunto cuánto tiempo querías permanecer en ese maldito lugar — una de las libertades que se había tomado como marido era el uso de sus epítetos más fuertes. Gwendolen, volviéndose para ver al resto del grupo acercarse, dijo:

—Hacía de verdad bastante calor tapados como vamos.

Caminaron sobre la grava a través de un patio verde, donde todavía quedaban restos de nieve sobre la hierba, sobre las ramas del gran cedro y sobre los grabados de las paredes de piedra, y luego se dirigieron a un patio más largo, donde había otro cedro, y en el que encontraron el hermoso coro que hacía mucho tiempo que se había transformado en establo, tal vez debido en una primera instancia al capricho espontáneo de los soldados de caballería, que tenían una satisfacción devota en insultar a los sacerdotes de Baal y las imágenes de Astarté[169], la reina del cielo. El exterior —su extremo oeste, que salvo la puerta del establo estaba levantado con ladrillos y cubierto de hiedra— estaba muy desfigurado, la decoración de sus capiteles y sus gárgolas mutiladas, sus rocas calizas disgregables descuartizadas, y prestando su suave color gris a un polvoriento liquen oscuro; las largas ventanas, también estaban restauradas con ladrillos, así como el arranque de los arcos; y los anchos ventanales de la antigua iglesia se habían tapado con rejas. Bajo el sol invernal, que proyectaba las sombras de las ramas de los cedros, e iluminaba los bloques de nieve que quedaban sobre cada repisa, todavía conservaba sin apenas alteración el aspecto de antigua solemnidad, que le daba a la escena del interior un efecto sorprendente; aunque, si dejamos de lado la indignación eclesiástica o reverencial, uno no podía dejar de mirar extasiado su fascinante afecto pintoresco. Cada capilla arqueada había sido convertida en una cuadra, y en los vidrios polvorientos de las ventanas todavía refulgían manchas carmesí, naranjas, azules y violeta pálido; en cuanto al resto, el coro había sido destruido, el suelo elevado, pavimentado y drenado según la moda más actual, y en medio se destacaba una hilera de cuadras sin techo: una suave luz caía de las ventanas más altas sobre los lomos marrones y grises y las caderas pulidas, sobre suaves rostros equinos que observaban sin dejar de mover sus narices el oscuro entablado barnizado; sobre el heno que colgaba de los pedestales que una vez albergaron estatuas de santos, y sobre la paja de pálido color dorado esparcida o en montones; sobre un perrito de aguas que utilizaba como cama el trasero de un caballo y sobre cuatro ángeles antiguos, que aún mostraban signos de devoción como mártires mutilados, mientras sobre todo ello, el gran tejado en punta, sin reformar, lucía sus líneas y colores misteriosamente a través de un halo de sombras y telarañas, y de vez en cuando la patada de alguna pezuña contra el entablado llenaba la bóveda con un gran estruendo como si de un trueno se

tratase, mientras en el exterior se oían los aullidos de los perros de San Huberto[170].

—¡Oh, esto es magnífico! —explotó Gwendolen, olvidándose de todo salvo de su impresión inmediata: se había intoxicado un poco con los grandes espacios de los patios y del edificio, y con el hecho de ser una persona importante en medio de ellos—. ¡Esto es magnífico! Solo faltaría que hubiera un caballo en cada uno de los compartimentos. Preferiría tener diez veces más estos establos que los de Diplow.

Pero tan pronto como dijo esto, la frenó cierta consciencia, y volvió los ojos involuntariamente hacia Deronda, que curiosamente se había sacado su sombrero de fieltro y lo mantenía enfrente suyo como si hubieran entrado en alguna sala o en una iglesia. Al igual que los demás, resultó que la estaba mirando a ella, y sus ojos se encontraron —para gran insatisfacción suya—, pues le parecía que, al mirarle, le descubría su pensamiento, y sintió que enrojecía: exageraba la impresión que tanto Sir Hugo como Deronda iban a tener de su mal gusto por referirse a cualquier posesión de la Abadía; en cuanto a Deronda, probablemente había sido ella quien había provocado que la despreciara. Su irritación por lo que imaginaba ser la evidencia de su confusión le privaba de salir del paso como hacía habitualmente mediante un comentario jocoso, y girando la cara para mirar al techo, continuó con su actitud de asombro. Si alguien hubiera apreciado su sonrojo como algo significativo, sin duda no lo habría interpretado de acuerdo con lo más recóndito y tortuoso de sus sentimientos. Enrojecer no pertenece al lenguaje: solo es una señal dudosa que puede significar una cosa y su contraria. Deronda solo intuía débilmente parte de sus sentimientos; pero mientras la observaba, él mismo estaba siendo observado.

—¿Se saca usted el sombrero ante los caballos? —dijo Grandcourt con un ligero tono de burla.

—¿Por qué no? —dijo Deronda, cubriéndose de nuevo. Se había sacado el sombrero, de hecho, automáticamente; si hubiera sido un hombre feo, su acción habría sido considerada sin duda impune: en estos casos, la fealdad hace pensar en una exposición involuntaria; la belleza, en exhibición.

La confusión de Gwendolen pronto quedó olvidada por su reconocimiento de los caballos, que Grandcourt se abstuvo cortésmente de apreciar, asintiendo lánguidamente a la desvalorización, alternada con el elogio, de Sir Hugo al mismo animal, como uno que no debería haber comprado cuando era

joven, pues debía haberse sentido ya orgulloso de sus caballos, pero que tenía mejores cualidades que muchos otros brutos más caros.

—El hecho es que los establos salen cada vez más caros para el bolsillo, así que estoy satisfecho de haberme librado de esa desazón —dijo Sir Hugo mientras salían.

—¿Pero qué es lo que ha de hacer un hombre? —dijo Grandcourt—. Hay que cabalgar. No veo qué otra cosa puede hacerse. Y yo no llamo cabalgar a estar sentado a horcajadas de unos brutos deformes bajo el sol.

Esta forma diplomática y delicada de caracterizar el semental de Sir Hugo no precisaba respuesta alguna; y el baronet, que pensaba que la conversación se estaba restringiendo demasiado, dijo a todos en general:

—Ahora vamos a ver el claustro, la parte más fina de todas, en perfecto estado de conservación: los monjes podían haber estado paseando por aquí ayer.

Pero Gwendolen se había quedado atrás observando la perrera de los sabuesos, tal vez porque se sentía un poco apagada; y Grandcourt la esperó.

—Será mejor que te cojas de mi brazo —dijo en su bajo tono de mando; y ella se agarró a él.

—Es muy aburrido ser conducido de esta manera, y sin ningún cigarro —dijo Grandcourt.

—Pensé que te gustaría.

—¿Gustarme? Es un cotorreo sin fin. Y estimular a esas chicas horribles; invitarle a uno a unirse a tales monstruos. ¿Cómo es que ese engreído de Deronda aguanta mirar a…?

—¿Por qué le llamas engreído? ¿Tan mal te cae?

—¿Caerme mal? No. ¿Qué me importa a mí que sea engreído? No me afecta en absoluto. Le invitaré de nuevo a Diplow si quieres.

—No creo que venga. Es demasiado inteligente e instruido como para preocuparse de nosotros —dijo Gwendolen, pensando que le haría un bien a su marido decirle (en privado) que alguien podía mirarle de arriba abajo.

—Nunca he visto que eso sea lo que distinguiera a un hombre. O es un caballero o no lo es —dijo Grandcourt.

Que una pareja de recién casados aprovechara un momento como ese de discusión cara a cara era del todo entendible y justificado; y el resto del grupo los dejó en la parte arada de atrás, y volviendo al jardín, se pararon delante del patio enclaustrado, donde trece años antes, entre pétalos de rosa caídos, vimos a un niño afrontando su primera toma de conciencia con el sufrimiento. Este

claustro estaba construido con piedra más fuerte que la de la iglesia, y había estado más resguardado de las inclemencias del tiempo. Era un raro ejemplo de un claustro del norte con aperturas arqueadas sostenidas por pilares, no destinada a ser cerradas con cristales, y el follaje delicadamente labrado de los capiteles parecía descubrir todavía los trazos del cincel. Gwendolen había soltado el brazo de su marido y se había unido a las otras damas, a quienes Deronda les estaba haciendo ver el sentido delicado que había combinado la libertad con la precisión en la imitación de las formas de la naturaleza.

—Me pregunto si uno llega a valorar más a menudo los objetos reales a través de sus representaciones, o las representaciones a través de los objetos reales —dijo, tras señalar un hermoso capitel hecho a base de hojas engarzadas, mostrando su revés reticulado con el firme ensanchamiento de su nervio central—. Cuando era un niño pequeño, estos capiteles me enseñaron a observar y a deleitarme en la estructura de las hojas.

—Supongo que puede ver cada línea de ellas con los ojos cerrados —dijo Juliet Fenn.

—Sí. Siempre las tenía en mi cabeza, pues por muchos años este patio fue para mí la única imagen que tenía de un convento, y cada vez que leía algo de monjes y monasterios, los situaba en este escenario.

—Le debe gustar mucho este sitio —dijo la señorita Fenn, inocentemente, sin pensar en la herencia—. Hay tantas casas que son como las demás. Pero esta es única, y usted parece conocer hasta la última grieta de ella. Diría que nunca le podrá gustar una casa como esta.

—Oh, la llevo dentro de mí —dijo Deronda, tranquilamente, acostumbrado a pensamientos de este tipo—. Para la mayoría de los hombres la casa de su infancia no es más que un recuerdo de esos años tempranos, y creo que se quedan con lo mejor de esos recuerdos. La imagen nunca se difumina. No hay lugar para la decepción en los recuerdos, y las exageraciones siempre son por el lado positivo.

Gwendolen estaba segura de que había hablado de esa manera por delicadeza hacia ella y Grandcourt, a que sabía que podían oírle; y que probablemente pensaba de ella como una criatura egoísta que solo estaba preocupada por acumular posesiones. Pero dijera lo que dijera, tenía que ser para él una amargura secreta que las circunstancias de su nacimiento le hubieran cerrado las puertas a la herencia de la posición de su padre; y si él suponía que ella se alegraba de que su marido tomara posesión de ellas, ¿qué es lo que sentiría por ella sino una compasión despectiva? De hecho, le

parecía evidente que la estaba evitando, y que prefería hablar con otras, cosa que, sin embargo, no era un gesto de amabilidad.

Con estos pensamientos, se abstuvo de dirigirse de nuevo a él, un poco por orgullo y un poco por timidez, y cuando estaban mirando una fila de cuadros pintorescos en la galería situada encima del claustro, mantuvo su actitud de interés e hizo observaciones vivaces sin dirigirse por nada a Deronda. Pero al final, se sintió muy cansada de sus supuestos bríos, y mientras Grandcourt entraba en la sala del billar, ella fue hacia el hermoso tocador que se le había asignado, y se encerró para desahogarse, mirándose con melancolía. No hay un proceso químico que muestre una actividad más impresionante que la influencia transformadora de los pensamientos que imaginamos tiene otra persona. Los cambios en las teorías, en la religión, en las cosas que admiramos, pueden comenzar con un recelo de disconformidad o de desaprobación, incluso cuando los motivos de disidencia no son más que simples conjeturas.

La pobre Gwendolen era consciente de un desagradable proceso transformador —toda su vieja naturaleza sacudida hasta las entrañas, sus esperanzas frustradas, sus alegrías perturbadas, pero mostrando todavía entereza y fuerza en su voluntad de rehacerse—. Tras cada nuevo impacto producido por alguna humillación intentaba acomodarse y apoyarse en sus antiguos sustentos —fingimiento orgulloso—, esperar nuevas diversiones que hicieran que la vida transcurriera sin pensar demasiado; esperar algún acto de reparación que anulara su sentido de culpabilidad y la protegiera del miedo vago pero insistente a que le ocurriera alguna calamidad horrible; esperar que el efecto endurecedor del uso y la costumbre la hicieran indiferente a sus miserias.

Sí, miserias. Esta joven criatura, sana y hermosa, con sus veintidós años y su ambición complaciente, ya no sentía ganas de besar su imagen afortunada en el espejo; se miraba en él sorprendida de que pudiera ser tan miserable. La certidumbre que la había acompañado en su vida de soltera, como una superstición lisonjera, avivada por la subordinación de todo el mundo a ella —la certidumbre de su propio poder de dominación— se había esfumado. Ya tan solo en unas pocas semanas, que le parecían como media vida, su marido había ganado un control que ella no podía resistir; este efecto la había dejado tan paralizada como si le hubiera alcanzado un torpedo. La voluntad de Gwendolen había parecido imperiosa en su pequeño balanceo infantil; pero era la voluntad de una criatura con una gran cantidad de temores imaginarios:

una sombra habría sido suficiente para tranquilizarla. Y se había tropezado con otra voluntad como la de un cangrejo o la de una boa que continúa pellizcando o estrujando sin alarmarse de que haya tormenta. No es que Grandcourt no calculara los efectos intangibles que eran los principales medios de su dominio; de hecho, tenía una sorprendente agudeza en detectar la situación de los sentimientos de Gwendolen, lo que hacía que su espíritu orgulloso y rebelde se sintiera enmudecido e impotente ante él.

Había quemado la carta de Lydia Glasher con un terror instantáneo, no fuera que otros ojos la vieran y había ocultado tenazmente a Grandcourt que su violento histerismo no se debiese a ninguna causa más que a la excitación y fatiga del día: había sido forzada a participar en una mentira sobreentendida. «No me preguntes nada, ha sido por mi reacción ante todo, ha sido por el cambio súbito de casa». Las palabras de esa carta no cesaban de repetirse, y se cernían sobre su conciencia con el peso de una condenación profética. «Soy la tumba donde está enterrada su oportunidad de felicidad, así como la mía. Se le avisó. Y escogió injuriarme a mí y a mis hijos. Pretendía casarse conmigo. Se habría casado conmigo al fin si usted no hubiera roto su palabra. Tendrá usted su castigo. Lo deseo con toda mi alma. ¿Le dará esta carta a él para ponerlo en mi contra y arruinarnos más, a mí y a mis hijos? ¿Le gustará estar delante de su marido con los diamantes puestos, y mis palabras en el pensamiento tanto de él como de usted? ¿Pensará él que tiene usted motivos para quejarse por haberla hecho miserable? Le aceptó usted sabiéndolo todo. El deliberado mal que me ha hecho será su maldición».

Las palabras habían esparcido su veneno dentro de ella, y habían recordado continuamente la visión de la escena en las Piedras Susurrantes. Esa escena era ahora como una aparición acusadora: temía que Grandcourt supiera de ella; qué lejos de su vista quedaba ahora la posibilidad que había llegado a considerar, la de hablarle a él de la señora Glasher y de sus hijos, y compensarles ampliamente. Podía aguantar cualquier cosa menos la humillación mortal de confesar que ya lo sabía todo antes de casarse, y que al casarse con él había faltado a su palabra. Las razones por las que se había justificado a sí misma cuando la tentó el matrimonio, y las sencillas disposiciones que iba a adoptar para que su futuro poder sobre su marido consiguiera que actuara mejor de lo que se sentía inclinado por naturaleza, eran ya tan inútiles como las velas apagadas por un niño. Su sensación de culpabilidad estaba exagerada por un temor que era a la vez definido y confuso. La parte definida pasaba por que no cayera el velo del secreto entre

ella y Grandcourt, y le diera el derecho de burlarse de ella. Con la lectura de esa carta había comenzado el imperio del miedo de su marido.

Y su marido lo había sabido todo ese tiempo. No tenía, por supuesto, una noción clara de su promesa rota, y no habría tenido muy en cuenta el efecto de esa brecha en su conciencia; pero era consciente no solo de lo que Lush le había dicho sobre su encuentro en las Piedras Susurrantes, sino también de cómo Gwendolen le había ocultado la verdadera causa de su repentino arrebato de histeria. Estaba seguro de que Lydia había adjuntado algo con los diamantes, y que ese algo, fuera lo que fuera, había acrecentado inmediatamente en Gwendolen una nueva repulsión hacia él y una razón para no atreverse a manifestarla. No le importaba mucho, ni tenía la sensación que habrían tenido muchos hombres de que sus esperanzas en el matrimonio habían quedado destrozadas: él había querido casarse con Gwendolen, y no era un hombre de arrepentirse. ¿Por qué un caballero que todas sus relaciones en la vida carecen del lujo del sentimiento compasivo debería requerir ese tipo de condimento en la vida doméstica? Lo que principalmente sentía era que iban a cambiar las condiciones de su dominio, y que, lejos de hacerlo tambalear, lo iba a fijar más firmemente. Y fue fijado. Consideraba que no se había casado con una chica simplona incapaz de percibir la imposibilidad de la huida, o de darse cuenta de que las alternativas eran peores: se había casado con una chica que tenía el juicio y el orgullo suficiente para no hacer ninguna tontería tirando por la borda todas las ventajas de una posición que le había atraído; y si ella buscaba insinuaciones elocuentes que la ayudaran a tomar la decisión adecuada, él cuidaría de no negárselas.

Gwendolen, ciertamente, con todos esos problemas royéndole la conciencia, apenas había dejado ni por unos momentos de sentir que era su deber soportarlo todo con dignidad y presentarse de una forma feliz. Exponiendo su decepción o su pena no veía más que una humillación que habría sido como vinagre para sus heridas. Fuese lo que se fuese a convertir finalmente su marido para ella, pretendía soportar ese yugo para no ser compadecida. Pues pensaba en los años por venir con un presentimiento: que iba a temer a Grandcourt. La pobrecilla había pasado de su descaro infantil en la que mostraba con una superioridad indiferente su distinción personal a una sorprendida percepción de su anterior ignorancia sobre la posible actitud mental de un hombre hacia la mujer que pretendía para el matrimonio —de su presente ignorancia sobre cómo se desarrollaría su vida hacia los demás—. Pues la novedad otorga un amplio espacio al miedo, y llena los primeros

momentos de un cambio triste con los fantasmas del futuro. Se había permitido breves coqueteos, voluntarios o involuntarios, con Grandcourt durante su cortejo, lo cual había servido como forma de comunicación entre ellos, mostrándole a él como a una criatura capaz de ser entendida y manejada; pero el matrimonio había anulado cualquiera de esos intercambios, y Grandcourt se había convertido en una incógnita total para ella salvo en esto, que él haría su voluntad, y que ella nunca podría contar con ningún medio en su poder para influir en esa voluntad, ni tendría forma racional de escapar de ella.

Lo que había ocurrido entre ellos sobre el asunto de llevar los diamantes había sido peculiar. Una noche, poco antes de que vinieran a la Abadía, iban a cenar al Castillo de los Brackenshaw. Gwendolen se había dicho que nunca llevaría esos diamantes: palabras horribles colgaban de ellos, como de una pesadilla, cuyas imágenes se detenían distorsionando su significado. Bajó vestida de blanco, tan solo con una cadenita de oro en el cuello de la que pendía una esmeralda, que Grandcourt le había regalado y pequeñas estrellitas de esmeralda en las orejas.

Grandcourt estaba de pie de espaldas al fuego y la observó mientras entraba.

—¿Voy a tu gusto en conjunto? —dijo, hablando más bien animada. Estaba encantada en esta ocasión de ir al Castillo de los Brackenshaw en su nueva dignidad, como los hombres que no intervienen más que en tristes asuntos y que de repente son admitidos a comer entre personas que los van a tomar por personajes más distinguidos.

—No —dijo Grandcourt.

Gwendolen se sintió inmediatamente incómoda, preguntándose qué es lo que le esperaba. Estaba preparada para discutir sobre los diamantes; pero ¿y si fuera a decirle, en su tono bajo de desprecio: «Lo que no me gustas nada eres tú»?. Era algo horroroso para ella odiarle en secreto; pero sería mucho peor cuando él mostrara el primer signo de odiarla a ella.

—¡Oh, por piedad! —exclamó, a lo que siguió una pausa hasta que no pudo soportarlo más—. ¿Cómo debo cambiarme?

—Ponte los diamantes —dijo Grandcourt, mirándola fijamente cerrando un poco los ojos.

Gwendolen hizo también una pausa, temerosa de mostrar cualquier emoción, aunque sintiendo de todas formas que sus ojos delataban un cambio

cuando se encontraron con los de él. Pero estaba obligada a responder, y dijo de forma tan indiferente como pudo:

—Oh, por favor, no. No creo que los diamantes me queden bien.

—Lo que tú creas no tiene ninguna importancia —dijo Grandcourt, con toda la autoridad de su *sotto voce*, que igual que su aderezo, imponía una sensación de poner fin a la discusión—. Es mi deseo que lleves los diamantes.

—Te ruego me disculpes; me gustan las esmeraldas que llevo —dijo Gwendolen, asustada a pesar de estar preparada. Esa mano blanca que se acariciaba el bigote era capaz, imaginaba, de rodearle el cuello y amenazarla con estrangularla; pues su miedo hacia él, que se mezclaba con un presentimiento indefinido de que le sucedería en su vida alguna calamidad merecida, había llegado a un punto supersticioso.

—Hazme el favor de explicarme la razón por no llevar los diamantes cuando yo lo deseo —dijo Grandcourt. Tenía todavía los ojos fijos en ella, quien sintió cómo iban cerrándose los suyos como si pretendiera expulsar el dolor que entraba por ellos.

¿De qué le servía rebelarse? No podía decir nada que la humillara aún más que la sumisión. Volviéndose lentamente y cubriéndose de nuevo, se dirigió a su tocador. Cuando cogió los diamantes se le ocurrió que su reticencia a llevarlos podía haber levantado en Grandcourt la sospecha de que ella supiera algo acerca de ellos que él no le hubiera contado. Se imaginaba que los ojos de él se deleitaban en torturarla. ¿Cómo podía ella mostrarse desafiante? No podía decir nada que le conmoviera —cualquier cosa haría aumentar su dominio sobre la conciencia de ella—.

«Disfruta apocando a los perros y a los caballos: en parte por eso le gusta llamarlos suyos», se dijo, mientras abría el joyero con una sensación estremecedora. «Lo mismo será conmigo, y yo quedaré reducida a nada. ¿Qué más me espera? Pero no diré al mundo: “Compadecedme”».

Iba a tocar el timbre para llamar a su criada cuando oyó que se abría la puerta detrás de ella. Era Grandcourt que entraba.

—Querrás que alguien te los abroche —dijo, dirigiéndose hacia ella.

Ella no respondió, simplemente permaneció en pie, dejando que él cogiera las joyas y se las colocara a su gusto. Sin duda había aprendido a hacerlo con alguien más. Con cierto sarcasmo hacia sí misma, Gwendolen pensó: «¡Qué privilegio es este, habérselo robado a otra mujer!».

—¿Qué te hace estar tan fría? —dijo Grandcourt, cuando terminó de abrocharle el último pendiente—. Te ruego que te pongas varias pieles. Odio

ver entrar a una mujer en una habitación con el rostro helado. Si tienes que aparecer como una señora, hazlo de forma decente.

El discurso marital no era precisamente persuasivo, pero espoleó el orgullo de Gwendolen y la obligó a reanimarse. Las palabras de la pesadilla todavía remitían a los diamantes, pero solo para ella: para los demás eran brillantes que le sentaban perfectamente, y Grandcourt se dijo internamente que ella empezaba a aceptar su dominio.

—Oh, sí, mamá, muy feliz —Gwendolen había dicho en su retorno a Diplow—. No me decepcionó en absoluto Ryelands. Es un lugar mucho más agradable que este, más amplio en todos los sentidos. ¿Pero no quieres algo más de dinero?

—¿No sabías que el señor Grandcourt me dejó una carta el día de tu boda? Voy a disponer de unos ingresos de ochocientas libras al año. Quiere que me quede en Offendene por ahora, mientras tú estás en Diplow. Pero si hubiera alguna casita bonita cerca del parque en Ryelands, podríamos vivir allí sin gastar mucho, y te tendría cerca la mayor parte del año, tal vez.

—Debemos dejar eso al señor Grandcourt, mamá.

—Oh, por supuesto. Es extraordinariamente amable por su parte decir que pagará la renta de Offendene hasta junio. Y nosotras podemos seguir muy bien, sin ningún sirviente varón salvo Crane, solo para los jardines. Nuestra buena Merry se quedará con nosotras y me ayudará a arreglarlo todo. Es natural que el señor Grandcourt desee que viva en una casa con buen estilo en tu vecindario, y yo no puedo rechazar eso. ¿Así que no te dijo nada de eso a ti?

—No, supongo que quería que lo supiera de ti.

Gwendolen, de hecho, había estado muy preocupada por saber de forma definitiva lo que harían con su madre, pero desde que se casó no había sabido encontrar el momento de reunir el valor para comentar el tema con Grandcourt. Ahora, sin embargo, se sentía obligada a no dejar pasar la oportunidad de decirle:

—Desde que se casó, has sido muy bueno al hacerte cargo de mi madre. Dice mucho de ti que te hayas casado con una chica que no tenía nada que ofrecerte salvo parientes pobres.

Grandcourt estaba fumando, y dijo sin hacer mucho caso:

—Por supuesto no iba a permitir que viviera como la madre de un guardabosques.

«Al menos no es un avaro —pensó Gwendolen—, y mamá ha salido muy beneficiada de mi matrimonio».

Siempre estaba pensando en lo que habría pasado si no se hubiera casado con Grandcourt y comparándolo con lo que sucedía actualmente, intentando persuadirse que era inútil encontrar satisfacción en la vida, y que si hubiera escogido otra opción podría estar ahora arrepintiéndose con tanta amargura como la que sentía actualmente y que trataba de apartar. La insulsez de su madre, que tanto solía irritarla, la veía ahora como el resultado normal de la experiencia de una mujer. Es verdad que todavía se decía que «se las apañaría de forma diferente a como lo había hecho su mamá»; pero la forma de apañarse solo se refería ahora a llevar sus problemas con ánimo, y no dejar que ninguno de ellos la anularan. Se prometió que algún día se acostumbraría a esa angustia del corazón, y que hallaría emociones que le harían pasar agradablemente la vida, como un paseo a galope que la hacía evadirse durante unas horas matutinas. Le quedaba el juego: había oído historias en Leubronn de mujeres a la moda que apostaban de todas las formas posibles. No le llamaba demasiado a esa distancia, pero tal vez si jugara de nuevo, pudiera recuperar la pasión. Además, estaba el placer de producir un gran efecto al aparecer en sociedad: ¿qué hacían las bellezas famosas en el pueblo si sus maridos podían permitirse exhibirlas? Cualquier hombre estaba fascinado por ellas: iban perfectamente vestidas y equipadas con todo lo necesario, se dejaban ver en espacios públicos, inclinaban su cabeza, y respondían con las preguntas usuales, y se marchaban de nuevo: tal vez compraban porcelana, y ejercitaban sus talentos. ¡Ojalá le pudieran volver a apetecer esos placeres, que pudiera creer en ellos como antes! Sus talentos habían dejado de ser para ella prometedores o preeminentes; y en cuanto a los caballeros fascinados —admiradores que sobrevolaran a su alrededor lánguidamente, presentando una imagen del matrimonio llena de misterio romántico, de pasión, y de peligro, una noción algo infantil que había obtenido de sus lecturas en francés— se presentaban ante su imaginación con la circunstancia fatal de que en lugar de fascinarla también a ella, los veía envueltos con el mismo desánimo y desaliento que la afectaban a ella. El hombre admirador, que ajustaba apresuradamente los rasgos de su expresión y el giro de su conversación a los supuestos gustos de ella, había sido siempre un objeto absurdo para ella, y en la actualidad le parecían más bien detestables. Hay muchos rumbos —locuras y fechorías tanto convenientes como inconvenientes— que se siguen sin conseguir la felicidad o sin esperanza de conseguirla; pero cuando nos

consolamos imaginando cualquier rumbo de antemano, tiene que haber un anticipo de felicidad en forma de deseo; y el deseo de Gwendolen se había apagado. Por mucho que discurriera sobre las posibilidades de su vida, no dejaba de perseguirla una sombra de incertidumbre. Su confianza en sí misma y en su destino se habían convertido en remordimiento y temor; no confiaba ni en sí misma ni en su futuro.

Este desamparo latente acrecentó la sensación del poder que tenía Deronda sobre su conducta, como si tuviera fijado de antemano un criterio desconocido por el cual la juzgaba a ella. ¿Es que acaso tenía él una forma de mirar las cosas que podía significar una nueva ayuda para ella, como una defensa interior contra sucesos posibles que temía le sucedieran? Es uno de los secretos en ese cambio de equilibrio mental que muy apropiadamente se le ha denominado conversión, que para muchos de nosotros ni el cielo ni la tierra nos dicen nada hasta que alguna persona nos conmueve con su influencia particular, y nos acerca a ellos. Había sido hasta ahora una costumbre en Gwendolen ver a los demás como libros gastados, demasiado familiares para considerarlos dignos de interés. Deronda había llamado su atención con una sensación de novedad: no solo por palabras, sino también por hechos imaginados, su influencia había entrado en esa corriente de recelo y culpabilidad de uno mismo despertada por una nueva conciencia.

«Ojalá pudiera él saberlo todo sin necesidad de que se lo dijera», llegó a pensar, mientras se sentaba en el extremo de un sofá, aguantándose la cabeza con las manos, y mirándose en un espejo, no con admiración, sino con una triste especie de compañerismo. «Me gustaría que supiese que no soy tan despreciable como piensa, que tengo problemas muy graves, y que me gustaría ser mejor si pudiera». Sin la ayuda de ninguna ceremonia sagrada o de hábito alguno, sus sentimientos habían convertido a este hombre, solo unos pocos años mayor que ella, en un sacerdote; una especie de confianza menos infrecuente que la fidelidad que la preserva. Un profundo respeto por alguien que también es joven es lo más coercitivo de todo: hay el mismo nivel de tentación, y todas las acciones se consideran hechas con plena fuerza, sin sospechar que pueden ser el residuo de una experiencia cansada.

Pero la coerción es a menudo más fuerte para el que es reverenciado. Los que confían en nosotros nos educan. Y tal vez en esa consagración ideal de Gwendolen se preparaba cierta educación para Deronda.

Capítulo 36

Rien ne pèse tant qu’un secret,
Le portier loin est difficile aux dames:
Et je sçais mesme sur ce fait
Bon nombre d’hommes qui sont femmes[171].

La Fontaine

Mientras tanto, Deronda había sido cogido y conducido afuera por el señor Vandernoodt, que deseaba dar un buen paseo, fumar un cigarro y contar chismorreos. Dado que no podemos contar a un hombre sus propios secretos, la limitación de estar en su compañía nos lleva a menudo a desear conversar con alguien más ignorante, y el señor Vandernoodt dijo en esos momentos:

—¡Grandcourt es como una pieza de algodón desgastada! Pero si a usted le cae bien, retiro el comentario.

—En absoluto —dijo Deronda.

—Ya lo pensaba. Es asombroso cómo ha podido recuperar de nuevo la pasión; desde luego la ha tenido, casándose de esta forma. Aunque Lush, su viejo compañero, sugiere que se casó con esta chica por obstinación. ¡Por el rey Jorge! Una obstinación muy justificable. Un hombre podría decidirse casarse con ella sin el incentivo de la contradicción. Pero debe estar perdiendo dinero a raudales, ¿no?

—No sé nada de sus negocios.

—¿Qué? ¿No sabe nada de sus demás pertenencias?

—¿Diplow? Por supuesto. Lo recibió de Sir Hugo. Pero solo para este año.

—No, no, Diplow no; Gadsmere. Sir Hugo sabe que respondo por ello.

Deronda no dijo nada. Empezaba a sentir curiosidad de verdad, pero intuía que oiría lo que el señor Vandernoodt tenía que decir sin tener que preguntárselo.

—Lush no lo reconocería todo, por supuesto. Es un confidente y medianero de Grandcourt. Pero yo lo sé de buena fuente. El hecho es que hay otra señora con cuatro hijos en Gadsmere. Ella es la que tenía la sartén por el mango estos diez últimos años y algo más, y por lo que sé, todavía la tiene; dejó a su marido por él, y solía viajar con él por todas partes. Su marido está

ahora muerto: encontré a un hombre que estaba en el mismo regimiento que él, y conocía a esta señora Glasher antes de que alzara el vuelo. Una mujer de ojos oscuros apasionados, una notable belleza en su época, y él pensaba que estaba muerta. Decían que tenía a Grandcourt bajo su poder y fue realmente sorprendente que no se casara con ella, pues hay un precioso hijo en común, y entiendo que Grandcourt puede hacer lo que le plazca con sus fincas. Lush me contó bastante de eso.

—¿Qué derecho tenía para casarse con esa chica? —dijo Deronda, sintiendo repugnancia.

El señor Vandernoodt, apurando el final de su cigarro, se encogió de hombros y se apretó los labios.

—Puede que *ella* no sepa nada de esto —dijo Deronda, enfáticamente. Pero esa declaración fue seguida inmediatamente por una duda interna: «¿Podía haber sabido algo?».

—Es ciertamente una imagen interesante —dijo el señor Vandernoodt—. Grandcourt entre dos mujeres apasionadas. Pues según como, esta mujer de pelo rubio alberga mucha maldad. Me hice esa idea de ella en Leubronn. Es una especie de historia de Medea y Creúsa[172]. ¡Imagínese el encuentro entre las dos! Grandcourt es un nuevo tipo de Jasón: Me pregunto cómo interpretará su papel. Con mucho, es la parte de un perro. Casi estoy oyendo a Ristori[173] clamando: «¡Jasón! ¡Jasón!». Estas finas mujeres suelen acabar agarradas a un madero.

—Grandcourt puede morder, me imagino —dijo Deronda—. No es ningún madero.

—No, no, me refería a Jasón. Apenas puedo entender a Grandcourt. Pero es un hombre muy agudo, y de una constitución poco común. Y si llega a hacerse con todas estas propiedades, las fincas podrán dividirse. Esta chica, cuyos familiares, creo, han caído en la pobreza, puede sentirse afortunada de haberle cazado. No quiero ser duro con un hombre porque se haya envuelto en un asunto como este. Pero debería procurar ser más amable. La noche pasada le estaba contando una historia importante, y se levantó y se marchó a mitad. Tuve ganas de darle una patada. ¿Cree que fue por falta de atención o por insolencia?

—Oh, una mezcla. Normalmente observa las formas; pero no escucha demasiado —dijo Deronda. Luego, tras una pequeña pausa, prosiguió—: Creo que hay algo de exageración o de imprecisión en lo que usted escuchó sobre esta señora de Gadsmere.

—Ni lo más mínimo, según se mire; es un asunto que ha estado dormido en los últimos años. La gente lo ha olvidado todo sobre ello. Pero ahí está el nido, y los pájaros en él. Y yo sé que Grandcourt va allí. Tengo la garantía de que es así. Sin embargo, eso no es asunto de nadie más que de él mismo. El tema ha quedado tapado.

—Me maravilla que usted haya podido averiguar tantas cosas sobre esto —dijo Deronda, un poco secamente.

—Oh, mucha gente sabía estas cosas; pero estas historias quedaron archivadas como viejas cartas. Pero a mí me interesan. Me gusta conocer las formas de mi época, el cotilleo actual, no el antediluviano. Hombres al estilo Dryasdust[174] consiguen una reputación descubriendo algún escándalo sobre Semíramis o Nitocris[175], y luego tenemos mil y un poemas recitados por cantantes famosos y nimios. Pero a mí no me importan lo más mínimo los pasos en falso dados por las momias. A usted parece que sí. Usted es uno de esos hombres históricos, más interesados en una mujer cuando su cara es un pingajo y le asoma el esqueleto de los dedos de sus pies. ¿Estimula eso su imaginación?

—Bueno, si había pena en su amor, uno se queda con la satisfacción de saber que ya se ha deshecho de ella.

—Ah, veo que está usted pensando en Medea.

Deronda decidió señalar entonces a unos robles gigantes sin hojas que merecía la pena admirar. También se sentía interesado en este cotilleo actual, pero estaba contento de que el señor Vandernoodt no tuviera nada más que contar.

Desde los primeros días en que había tratado de reconstruir la historia secreta de su propio nacimiento, su mente no había estado quizás tan ocupada en barajar probabilidades sobre un asunto privado como empezaba a estarlo ahora con el matrimonio de Gwendolen. Esta relación oculta de Grandcourt… ¿podía ser que se hubiera enterado ella, lo que la asustó de comprometerse, pero que luego la pobreza la hubiera obligado a aceptar? Recordaba casi cada palabra que ella le había dicho, y algunas de ellas parecían delatar que había hecho algo mal, que había hecho daño a alguien. Su propia profunda experiencia le hacía ser consciente de qué forma podía haber hecho daño a los hijos secretos y a su madre. ¿Es que debajo de ese despliegue de satisfacción, la señora Grandcourt, escondía una doble o incluso una triple pena: el autoreproche, la decepción, y la envidia? Se paró especialmente a pensar en los ligeros signos de autoreproche: se sentía inclinado a juzgarla suavemente,

a excusarla, a compadecerla. Creyó haber encontrado la clave para poder interpretarla con más claridad: ¡cómo no iba a magnificar su desgracia una joven criatura que había ligado sus tiernas esperanzas con viejos secretos! Pensó que ahora veía claramente por qué Sir Hugo nunca le había insinuado nada de este asunto; e inmediatamente asoció dolorosamente la imagen de esta señora Glasher con su propio nacimiento secreto. Que Gwendolen supiera de esa mujer y sus hijos, y aún así se casara con Grandcourt, y se mostrara satisfecha, podía situarla como uno de los seres más repulsivos; pero el hecho de sentir la amargura del remordimiento por haber contribuido a su sufrimiento la acercaba mucho a su compasión. Si así fuera, se había situado al mismo nivel que él en la comprensión de ciertas dificultades de la vida que raramente una mujer es capaz de juzgar con justicia o generosidad; pues, según los precedentes, Gwendolen podía no haber tenido otra visión de su posición que la de que para su marido, casarse con ella, era su entrada en la senda de la virtud, mientras que la señora Glasher representaba su pecado desamparado. Y Deronda sentía naturalmente rabia por las injusticias cometidas contra las Agaras y los e Ismaeles[176].

Indudablemente, la creciente inquietud de Deronda por Gwendolen dependía principalmente por el trato peculiar que ella le otorgaba; y no creo que nadie sea mejor por mostrar su indiferencia a este tipo de reclamos. Un signo de que su interés por ella había dado un cambio era que dejó de preocuparse por que su coquetería pudiera atraparle en un flirteo vulgar, y decidió que no dejaría escapar ninguna otra oportunidad de hablar con ella. Se había sacado de encima al señor Vandernoodt, y había ido mientras atardecía hacia una esquina solitaria; pero con media hora ya había tenido suficiente tiempo para pensar en todas las posibilidades de la situación de Gwendolen y en lo que ella podía pensar; y al tomar la determinación de no seguir evitándola, se acordó de que ella iba a estar probablemente tomando el té con otras damas en la sala de estar. La conjetura resultó cierta; pues Gwendolen, tras decidir que no volvería a bajar las siguientes cuatro horas, empezó a darse cuenta, después de que pasara una, que al encerrarse arriba, se perdía todas las posibilidades de ver y de oír, y que su visita solo iba a durar dos días más. Se preparó, revistiéndose de su aire de autoposesión, y al bajar, se mostró resueltamente agradable. Solo estaban reunidas varias damas, y Lady Pentreath las estaba entreteniendo con la descripción de un salón del estilo de la Regencia[177], y la imagen que ofrecían las damas y caballeros en 1819, el año en que ella fue presentada, y en esto, entró Deronda.

—¿Me aceptan entre ustedes? —dijo—. Tal vez sea mejor que regrese y busque a los hombres. Me imagino que estarán en la sala de billar.

—No, no, quédese donde está —dijo Lady Pentreath—. Se estaban todas cansando de mí; oigamos lo que tiene que decir *usted*.

—Eso es una petición algo embarazosa —dijo Deronda, arrastrando una silla cerca de Lady Mallinger en la mesa del té—. Creo que aprovecharé la oportunidad para mencionar a nuestra cantante —añadió, mirando a Lady Mallinger—, a menos que ya lo haya hecho.

—¡Oh, la pequeña judía! —dijo Lady Mallinger—. No, todavía no he hablado de ella. Ni se me pasó por la cabeza que nadie de aquí quisiera recibir lecciones de canto.

—Todas las señoras conocen a alguien más que quiere recibir lecciones de canto —dijo Deronda—. Resulta que he encontrado a una cantante excelente —al decir esto se giró hacia Lady Pentreath—. Está viviendo con algunas señoras amigas mías, la madre y las hermanas de un joven que era compañero mío en Cambridge. Actuó en Viena; pero quiere dejar esa vida, y ganarse el pan enseñando.

—Mucha gente quiere hacer eso, ¿no? —dijo la vieja señora—. ¿Sus lecciones van a ser muy baratas o muy caras? Son los únicos cebos que conozco.

—Hay otro cebo para los que la oigan —dijo Deronda—. Yo creo que su canto es algo totalmente excepcional. Ha tenido una enseñanza tan buena, o más bien un instinto tan bueno para aprender, que podría pensarse que todo su canto le viene por naturaleza.

—¿Por qué dejó el escenario, entonces? —dijo Lady Pentreath—. Soy ya muy mayor para creer que gente de primera pierda oportunidades de primera.

—Su voz era demasiado débil. Es una voz deliciosa para una sala. Usted que me soportó cantando a Schubert estaría encantada con ella —dijo Deronda, mirando a la señora Raymond—. Y supongo que no se negará a cantar en fiestas privadas o en conciertos. Su voz está muy preparada para eso.

—Voy a llevarla conmigo cuando subamos al pueblo —dijo Lady Mallinger—. La oiréis entonces. Yo todavía no la he oído; pero confío en la recomendación de Daniel. Mis hijas recibirán clases de ella.

—¿Es por caridad? —dijo Lady Pentreath—. No puedo soportar la música por caridad.

Lady Mallinger, que estaba un poco desprotegida en la conversación, y que se sentía bajo el compromiso de no contar nada de la historia de Mirah, tenía una sonrisa embarazosa en su rostro, y miraba a Deronda.

—La caridad se dirige a aquellos que quieran recibir un buen modelo de cántico femenino —dijo Deronda—. Creo que cualquiera que tenga oído se beneficiará de mejorar un poco su estilo. Si usted oyera a la señorita Lapidoth —en esto miró a Gwendolen— tal vez revocaría su decisión de abandonar el canto.

—Creo que confirmaría aún más mi decisión —dijo Gwendolen—. No me siento capaz de seguir su consejo de disfrutar de mi propia mediocridad.

—Por mi parte —dijo Deronda—, la gente que hace algo bien siempre me inspira a intentarlo yo mismo. No me refiero a que me hagan creer que lo puedo hacer tan bien. Pero consiguen que eso, sea lo que sea, parezca que valga la pena el hacerlo. Puedo pensar que mi música no vale mucho, pero el mundo sería muy triste si pensara que la música en sí misma no vale mucho. La excelencia le anima a uno sobre la vida en general; muestra la riqueza espiritual del mundo.

—¿Pero qué ocurre si no podemos imitarlo? Eso hace que nuestra vida parezca todavía más insípida —dijo Gwendolen, resentida por verse estimulada a partir de su propia insignificancia.

—Eso depende del punto de vista, creo —dijo Deronda—. Sería muy triste que redujéramos todo nuestro placer a nuestras propias actuaciones. Una pequeña imitación privada de lo que es bueno es una especie de devoción privada hacia ello, y la mayoría de nosotros deberíamos practicar el arte solamente en privado, como preparación para entender y disfrutar lo que solo unos pocos pueden hacer para nosotros. Creo que la señorita Lapidoth es una de esas pocas personas.

Debe ser una persona muy feliz, ¿no cree? —dijo Gwendolen, en un tono de sarcasmo, y girando el cuello hacia la señora Raymond.

—No lo sé —respondió la señora independiente—. Tendría que oír más de ella para decirlo.

—Tiene que haberla decepcionado un poco que su voz le fallara en el escenario —dijo Juliet Fenn, con compasión.

—Supongo que ya habrán pasado sus mejores momentos —dijo la profunda voz de Lady Pentreath.

—Al contrario, aún no han llegado —dijo Deronda—. Apenas tiene veinte años.

—Y es muy hermosa —añadió Lady Mallinger, con la benévola intención de ayudar a Deronda—. Y se comporta de un modo muy correcto. Solo siento que sea una judía fanática; eso podría ser un problema para cualquier otra cosa, pero no importa en absoluto para el canto.

—Bueno, ya que su voz es muy débil para gritar mucho, le diré a la señora Clementina que la ponga a dar clases a mis nueve nietas —dijo Lady Pentreath; y espero que convenza a ocho de ellas de que no tienen la suficiente voz para cantar en ningún sitio salvo en la iglesia. Mi idea es que muchas de nuestras chicas de hoy en día quieren tomar lecciones para no cantar.

—También yo he tenido mis lecciones para eso —dijo Gwendolen, mirando a Deronda—. Ya ve que Lady Pentreath está de mi parte.

Mientras estaba hablando, Sir Hugo entró con otros caballeros, entre los cuales se hallaba Grandcourt, y acercándose al grupo sentado en torno a la mesa de té dijo:

—¿Qué les quiere imponer Deronda a las señoras, deslizándose de esta manera entre ustedes?

—Quiere hacernos creer que una desconocida puede hacerlo mejor que cualquier celebridad —dijo Lady Pentreath—, una hermosa cantante judía que tiene que impresionar a la gente joven. Usted y yo, que oímos a Catalani[178] en su debut, no somos tan fácilmente impresionables.

Sir Hugo escuchaba con su sonrisa de buen humor mientras tomaba una taza de té de su mujer, y luego dijo:

—Bueno, ya sabe, un liberal está destinado a pensar que ha habido más cantantes desde los tiempos de Catalani.

—Ah, usted es más joven que yo. Diría que usted es uno de esos hombres que fue tras la Alcharisi. Pero se casó y les dejó a todos ustedes con un palmo de narices.

—Sí, sí; lo peor que les sucede a estas grandes cantantes es casarse antes de que su voz se resienta. Quedan relegadas al silencio. Y su marido es un ladrón público. Recuerdo que Leroux decía: «Un hombre bien puede sacar las campanas de una iglesia y llevárselas a la estepa» —dijo Sir Hugo, dejando su taza y mirando hacia otro lado, mientras Deronda, que se había movido para hacer sitio a los demás, y creía que la cosa no iba con él, se retiró un poco. En esto, se dio cuenta que, aprovechando la dispersión general del grupo, Gwendolen se había desembarazado de las atenciones del señor Vandernoodt y había ido hasta el piano, donde aparentemente examinaba las partituras que

estaban sobre su tapa. ¿Alguien se sorprenderá si la conclusión de Deronda fue que ella deseaba reunirse con él? Tal vez quisiera enmendarse por el tono desagradable con el que se había opuesto a la recomendación de Mirah, pues él había notado que su primer impulso era a menudo decir algo de lo que luego se arrepentía. Fue hasta su lado y dijo:

—¿Está ya cediendo en cuanto a la música y buscando algo para tocar o cantar?

—No estoy buscando nada, pero sí estoy cediendo —dijo Gwendolen, hablando en un tono sumiso.

—¿Puedo saber la razón?

—Me gustaría oír a la señorita Lapidoth y tomar lecciones de ella, ya que usted la admira tanto, por supuesto, cuando vayamos a la ciudad. Me refiero a lecciones en las que pueda disfrutar de su excelencia y de mis propias limitaciones —dijo Gwendolen, dirigiéndole una dulce y amplia sonrisa.

—Me da mucha alegría que usted vaya a verla y a oírla —dijo Deronda, devolviéndole la sonrisa amablemente.

—¿Es tan perfecta en todo lo demás como en la música?

—No puedo garantizarlo exactamente. No la he visto tanto. Pero no he visto nada en ella que quisiera que cambiara. Ha tenido una vida infeliz. Sus problemas comenzaron ya en la infancia, y ha crecido rodeada de calamidades. Pero creo que usted dirá de ella que ni la prosperidad le habría dado más gracia y verdadero buen gusto.

—Me pregunto cuáles eran sus problemas.

—No tengo ningún conocimiento preciso. Pero sé que estuvo a punto de ahogarse por desesperación.

—¿Y qué es lo que la detuvo? —dijo Gwendolen rápidamente, mirando a Deronda.

—Algo la iluminó, lo que le hizo pensar que debía vivir, que era bueno vivir —respondió tranquilamente—. Es muy devota y parece que es capaz de someterse a cualquier cosa cuando toma la forma del deber.

—No hay que compadecer a esas chicas —dijo Gwendolen sin paciencia —. No congenio con las mujeres que siempre lo están haciendo todo bien. No creo en sus grandes sufrimientos. —Sus dedos se movieron rápidamente por el borde de las partituras.

—Es cierto —dijo Deronda—, que la conciencia de haber hecho algo mal es todavía peor, es más amargo. Supongo que nosotros, criaturas imperfectas, no podemos sentir tanto por la gente irreprochable como por los que se

lastiman en la lucha contra sus propias faltas. Es una historia muy antigua la de la oveja perdida, pero se renueva cada día.

—Eso lo dice solo de boca, pero no lo siente, no es real —dijo Gwendolen amargamente—. Usted admira a la señorita Lapidoth porque la cree intachable, perfecta. Y sabe que despreciaría a una mujer que hubiera hecho algo que usted pensara que estuviera muy mal.

—Eso depende completamente de lo que ella pensara acerca de lo que hubiera hecho —dijo Deronda.

—Supongo que usted estaría usted satisfecho si ella fuera muy malvada —dijo Gwendolen, con ímpetu.

—No, satisfecho no, sentiría lástima por ella. No era una simple forma de hablar. No me refería a que una naturaleza perfecta sea más adorable; quería decir que aquellas personas que de antemano parecen menos dignas de interés pueden merecer toda nuestra compasión cuando hacen algo que despierta en ellas un profundo remordimiento. Cada vida sigue su camino. Me atrevería decir que algunas personas nunca abrirían sus ojos si no fuera por el descubrimiento repentino de las consecuencias de sus propias acciones. Y cuando sufren de esa manera, uno debe cuidarlas más que las que se sienten a gusto consigo mismas. —Deronda no pensaba más que en su visión de lo que probablemente había sido la experiencia de Gwendolen, y se obligó por compasión a que sus ojos y su voz expresaran todo el interés posible.

Gwendolen se había deslizado hacia la banqueta del piano y le miraba con pena en sus ojos alargados, como un animal que pide ayuda.

—¿Estás convenciendo a la señora Grandcourt para que nos toque algo, Dan? —dijo Sir Hugo, acercándose y poniendo su mano sobre el hombro de Deronda, con un amable pellizco amonestador.

—No puedo convencerme ni yo de eso —dijo Gwendolen, levantándose.

Muchos otros siguieron la iniciativa de Sir Hugo, y se acabaron las confidencias por ese día. Pero el día siguiente era Nochevieja, y se celebraba un gran baile en la galería de los cuadros que había encima del claustro, en el que los inquilinos principales estaban invitados —el tipo de entretenimiento en que la gran cantidad de personas y el movimiento general ayuda a crear espacios privados—. Cuando Gwendolen estaba vistiéndose, anhelaba, en recuerdo de Leubronn, ponerse como adorno único el viejo collar turquesa; pero no se atrevía ofender a su marido apareciendo de esa forma tan simple en una ocasión en la que él exigiría que exhibiese su mayor esplendor. Decidida a llevar como fuese el nostálgico collar, fue a su habitación justo antes de

entrar al baile, y le dio tres vueltas alrededor de su muñeca, convirtiéndolo en un brazalete.

El baile de nochevieja había sido siempre una escena preciosa, mantenida por tradición familiar al estilo antiguo, con los mínimos cambios posibles. Se había extendido una alfombra roja para la ocasión. Se habían dispuesto plantas de invernadero y de hoja perenne formando enramadas en las esquinas y en cada uno de los nichos de la galería; y los retratos antiguos que mostraban generaciones anteriores incluso a las de la época en la que se pusieron de moda los retratos conformaban una línea curiosa de espectadores. Se invitó a algunos personajes más o menos señoriales del vecindario; y ciertamente era una oportunidad que los probables dueños del Cerro del Abad y del Rey pudieran complacerse en imaginar su futuro glorioso, como una pintoresca supremacía provincial con unas rentas provenientes de los arrendatarios más prósperos. Sir Hugo esperaba que Grandcourt se sintiera halagado por ser invitado a la Abadía en la época en que se celebraba este festival en honor de los bienes de la familia; pero también tenía la esperanza de que al ver su propio aspecto tan sano, su sucesor pensara que el período de tiempo que había de transcurrir hasta la sucesión iba ser probablemente bastante largo, y tuviera, por tanto, el sentido común suficiente como para preferir una buena cantidad de dinero a una propiedad menor por la que debía esperar. Todos los presentes, hasta la hija del granjero más insignificante, sabían que iban a ver al joven Grandcourt —el sobrino de Sir Hugo, el presunto heredero y futuro baronet, visitando la Abadía con su esposa tras una ausencia de muchos años—; se entendía que cualquier desavenencia entre tío y sobrino había concluido en una calurosa amistad. La mujer que abrió el baile con Sir Hugo era inevitablemente el punto de mira de todo el mundo; y menos de un año antes, si algún espejo mágico pudiera haber mostrado a Gwendolen su situación presente, se habría imaginado moviéndose en ella con una sensación de alegría triunfal, consciente de tener en sus manos una vida llena de oportunidades favorables que su inteligencia y su disposición podían sacarle el mejor partido. Y ahora se preguntaba cómo podía estar disfrutando tan poco de la posición a la que había sido elevada repentinamente, separada del insignificante y despreciable imperio de su infancia, que en absoluto contaba con distinción alguna más que la superfluidad de sus hermanas. Se habría contentado incluso con estar satisfecha sin motivo, y olvidarlo todo salvo la futilidad del momento; pero se

sentía como cuando no podemos reconciliar el sueño, en un estado en el que los pensamientos no dejan de atormentarnos una y otra vez.

Sin dejar de darle vueltas a su situación, mientras deseaba a la vez que alguna emoción atenuara un poco sus penas inoportunas, desfiló a través de los admiradores que bailaban una contradanza[179] con la que era tradicional abrir el baile, e incluso las de su sexo la miraban como a una mujer envidiable. Se comentaba que sabía estar a la altura, considerando que no había sido nadie en particular, sin ninguna expectativa de riquezas: si hubiera sido la hija de un duque, o una de las princesas reales, no habría recogido los honores de la velada con más naturalidad. ¡Pobre Gwendolen! Esta actitud de controlarse tan bien a sí misma ante la gran pérdida en las apuestas acabaría convirtiéndose en una especie de habilidad, pues ya tenía suficiente práctica.

La siguiente pareja que pasó también era digna de mirarse. Lady Pentreath había dicho: «Me levantaré para un baile, pero escogeré a mi compañero. Señor Deronda, es usted el hombre más joven; me gustaría bailar con usted. Nadie es lo bastante mayor como para hacer una buena pareja conmigo. Así que debo buscar el contraste». Y en verdad el contraste llevó a la vieja señora a lo más alto. Era una de esas mujeres que nunca son hermosas hasta que no son mayores, y había tenido la inteligencia de acoger la belleza de la edad tan pronto como fue posible. Lo que podía haber parecido tosco en sus rasgos cuando era joven, se había transformado en una dureza de sus formas y expresión que desafiaba a las arrugas, y ponía de relieve su corona de pelo blanco; cubría su figura bien formada con vestidura negra, tapaba sus orejas y el cuello con un encaje, sin mostrar ninguno de esos espacios marchitos que son considerados como un signo de pobreza el exponerlos. Se deslizaba con gracia suficiente, sus ojos oscuros todavía ofrecían una sonrisa maliciosa mientras observaba al grupo. La riqueza del color de su compañero contrastaba con los colores llanos y las formas ásperas de su edad, como una flor delicada en medio de un ramal de liquen. Tal vez los inquilinos no apreciaron apenas a esta pareja. Lady Pentreath no era más que una vieja dama, erguida y activa; el señor Deronda era una figura familiar, considerado un amigo; pero si él hubiera sido el heredero, muchos habrían lamentado que su rostro no fuera tan inconfundiblemente inglés como el de Sir Hugo.

El aspecto de Grandcourt cuando apareció con Lady Mallinger no fue tachado de extranjero: pero aún así, la satisfacción no fue completa. Habría sido un motivo de felicitación si alguien que tuviera la fortuna de heredar dos viejas haciendas familiares hubiera tenido un poco más de pelo, un color más

fresco, y una mirada más animada; pero que las grandes familias se acabaran con el nacimiento exclusivo de mujeres, y que las haciendas fueran a parar a un único heredero de complexión pálida, era una tendencia de las cosas que parecía confirmarse por muchos otros ejemplos. Todo el mundo estaba de acuerdo en que el señor Grandcourt no podía tomarse nunca por nada salvo lo que realmente era: un caballero de nacimiento; y que, de hecho, tenía toda la apariencia de un heredero. Tal vez la persona que le tenía en menor consideración en esos momentos era Lady Mallinger, para quien bailar esta contradanza con Grandcourt era como decir a gritos que era la mujer infeliz que no había producido más que hijas —algo poco mejor que no tener ningún hijo—, pobres criaturas, y que solo podía consolarse con su cariño y la maravillosa bondad que Sir Hugo les tenía. Pero tal malestar interno no impedía que la amable señora tuviera un aspecto elegante y vigoroso digno de admirarse, o que sus ojos azules miraran apaciblemente a sus vecinos. Todos los padres y madres la compadecían por no haber tenido un hermoso chico, o incluso varios —cosa que nadie había dudado cuando se casó—.

La galería incluía solo tres lados del cuadrilátero, pues el cuarto había sido cerrado formando una antecámara o pasillo: uno de los lados se usaba para bailar, y el lado contrario para la mesa de la cena, mientras que la parte intermedia estaba menos iluminada y preparada con asientos confortables. Más tarde en la noche, Gwendolen se hallaba sentada en uno de esos asientos, y Grandcourt de pie cerca de ella. No estaban hablando; ella estaba reclinada hacia atrás en su sillón, y él se apoyaba contra la pared; y Deronda, que vio esta escena, fue a preguntarle a ella si había decidido no bailar más. Al haber hecho un buen trabajo entre los invitados, pensó que se había ganado el derecho de hundirse también en uno de los sillones; además, había hablado muy poco con Gwendolen desde su conversación en el piano el día anterior. La presencia de Grandcourt le facilitaba aún más el poder mostrar su satisfacción por hablar con ella incluso de trivialidades, como signo de amistad; y él veía que su cara parecía algo blanca. Una sonrisa se extendió sobre ella al verle venir, y se incorporó. Grandcourt había estado gruñendo por el aburrimiento de estar tanto rato con esta danza estúpida, y proponiéndole que debían esfumarse: ella se había negado por motivos de cortesía —no sin temer que probablemente él se enfadara interiormente con ella—. Tenía sus razones para quedarse, aunque ya estaba empezando a perder la esperanza de la oportunidad que buscaba al haberse puesto el viejo collar en su muñeca. Pero al final vino Deronda.

—Sí, ya no bailaré más. ¿No está usted contento? —dijo con cierta alegría —. Se habría sentido obligado a ofrecerse humildemente para bailar como compañero, y estoy segura de que ya ha bailado más de lo que habría querido.

—No voy a negarlo —dijo Deronda—, puesto que usted ha bailado tanto como ha querido.

—¿Pero se tomará usted la molestia por mí de otra forma, y me irá a buscar un vaso de agua fresca?

No eran más que unos pasos los que tuvo que dar Deronda para ir a por el agua. Gwendolen iba vestida con una túnica del más blanco, fino y suave algodón, bajo la cual estaban escondidas sus manos. Mientras él fue a por agua, ella se sacó su guante, del que colgaba un lazo en su extremo, y cuando sacó su mano para coger el vaso y llevárselo a la boca, el collar-brazalete, que con sus tres vueltas no se adaptaba del todo a su muñeca, se hizo necesariamente patente. Grandcourt lo vio, y vio que atraía la atención de Deronda.

—¿Qué es esa cosa horrible que tienes en la muñeca? —dijo el marido.

—¿Esto? —dijo Gwendolen, muy dueña de sí misma, señalando las turquesas, a la vez que seguía sosteniendo el vaso—; es un viejo collar que me gusta llevar. Lo perdí una vez, y alguien me lo recuperó.

Al decir esto devolvió el vaso a Deronda, que inmediatamente se lo llevó, y al volver, dijo con la intención de hacer olvidar el asunto del collar:

—Vale la pena que vaya y mire por una de las ventanas de ese lado. Podrá ver el más hermoso de los claros de luna incidiendo en los pilares de piedra y en las entalladuras, y las sombras ondeando al viento.

—Me encantaría verlo. ¿Me acompañas? —dijo Gwendolen mirando a su marido.

Este la fulminó con la mirada y diciéndole:

—No, Deronda te acompañará —abandonó la postura en que estaba apoyado y se alejó.

El rostro de Gwendolen reflejó por un momento una exasperación fugaz: le molestaba esta muestra de indiferencia. Deronda estaba también molesto, sobre todo por ella; pero dándose cuenta enseguida que lo que más la aliviaría era actuar como si nada peculiar hubiese ocurrido, dijo:

—¿Quiere cogerse de mi brazo e ir conmigo, mientras solo haya sirvientes? —Pensó haber entendido bien su intención al atraer su atención al collar: quería que él infiriera que ella había aceptado el reproche, (su forma de hablar y de actuar ya indicaban desde el principio esa sumisión), y que ya no

estaba resentida por ello. Vio que la evidente confianza que tenía en que él haría la interpretación correcta era en sí misma una súplica peculiar.

Cuando iban caminando juntos, Gwendolen tuvo la sensación de que la contrariedad que acababa de sucederles había corrido el velo de las pocas reservas que quedaban ya entre ellos, y que tenía más derecho que antes a abrirse tanto como desease. Ella no habló, estando llena de esa sensación de confianza silenciosa, hasta que estuvieron enfrente de la ventana, mirando hacia el patio iluminado por la luna. Una especie de enramada cubría la ventana, convirtiéndola en un nicho. Dejando su brazo, entrelazó sus manos bajo su túnica, y apoyó su frente en el vidrio. Él se apartó un poco, y ajustó las solapas de su abrigo bajo el cuello como era su costumbre: tenía un magnífico poder de permanecer perfectamente recto, y en esa posición recordaba a veces a uno de esos *spiritti magni con occhi tardi e gravi*[180] de Dante. (Sin duda, alguno de ellos bailó durante su juventud, dudaron de su propia vocación, y hallaron estos tiempos demasiado modernos). Se abstuvo de hacer ninguna observación sobre la escena que tenían ante ellos, temiendo que las palabras indiferentes pudieran sentarle mal a ella: la luz apacible y las sombras, las formas vetustas e inmóviles eran ya lo suficientemente cautivadoras como para apartar esos problemas internos de los que estaba seguro que le intranquilizaban. Y fue un buen juicio: ella se habría mostrado impaciente con una conversación cortés. Los incidentes de los últimos minutos le habían recordado pensamientos anteriores que había imaginado comentar con Deronda, y que ahora le venían urgentemente a sus labios. Con voz refrenada, dijo:

—Suponga que hubiera jugado de nuevo, y hubiera vuelto a perder el collar, ¿qué habría pensado de mí?

—Peor de lo que lo hago ahora.

—Entonces está usted equivocado conmigo. Usted quería que no hiciese eso, que no ganara a partir de otra pérdida, y yo he hecho algo mucho peor.

—Puedo imaginar las tentaciones —dijo Deronda—. Tal vez sea capaz de entender lo que usted quiere decir. Al menos entiendo el autorreproche. —A pesar de estar preparado, se sentía casi alarmado por la precipitación en que Gwendolen le mostraba su confianza, en contraste con su decidido ocultamiento habitual.

—¿Qué haría usted si fuera como yo, si sintiera que fuera malvado y miserable, y que temiera que todo pudiera suceder? —Parecía darse prisa en aprovechar la oportunidad de exteriorizar todo lo que pudiera.

—No puede enmendarse eso haciendo solo una cosa, sino muchas —dijo Deronda con determinación.

—¿Qué? —dijo Gwendolen, precipitadamente, separando la frente del vidrio y mirándole.

Él le devolvió a su vez plenamente la mirada, de una forma que ella interpretó como un gesto severo.

No creía que fuera un momento en el que debiera mostrarse tierno ni acobardarse por dejar clara su dura opinión.

—Quiero decir que hay muchos pensamientos y hábitos que pueden ayudarnos a soportar las penas inevitables. Hay mucha gente que tiene que hacerles frente.

Se apoyó de nuevo en la ventana, y dijo, con impaciencia:

—Debe usted decirme entonces lo que pensar y lo que hacer; si no, ¿por qué no me dejó continuar haciendo lo que quería, sin que le importara? Si hubiera seguido jugando habría ganado otra vez y no me tendría que haber preocupado por nada más. Pero no me dejó hacerlo. ¿Por qué no podía hacer lo que quisiera sin que me importara? Los demás lo hacen. —Los argumentos de la pobre Gwendolen no expresaban nada muy claro salvo su irritación.

—No creo que nunca llegara a no importarle —dijo Deronda, con profunda decisión—. Si fuera cierto que la bajeza y la crueldad permitieran escapar de las penas, ¿cómo se lo haría la gente que no puede ser lo suficientemente ruin o cruel? Los insensatos pueden escapar de las penas; pero usted no puede ser una insensata. Hay quienes pueden hacer daño a otros sin remordimiento; pero suponga que uno siente remordimiento. Estoy seguro que usted nunca podría llevar una vida injuriosa (todas las vidas temerarias son injuriosas y viciosas) sin sentir remordimiento alguno. —Inconscientemente, Deronda había ido enfervorizándose mientras hablaba: había exteriorizado pensamientos reservados solo para sí mismo en momentos de meditación angustiada.

—Entonces dígame qué es lo que puedo mejorar —insistió Gwendolen.

—Muchas cosas. Fíjese en otras vidas además de la suya. Observe sus problemas, y cómo los soportan. Intente preocuparse de algo más de este vasto mundo que de obtener la gratificación a sus pequeños deseos egoístas. Intente actuar y pensar de la mejor forma posible, piense en lo que es bueno y no solo en su desgracia.

Durante unos momentos Gwendolen permaneció callada. Luego, apartando la frente de nuevo del cristal, dijo:

—Quiere decirme que soy egoísta e ignorante.

Él le sostuvo la mirada en silencio antes de responder firmemente:

—Usted no continuará siendo egoísta ni ignorante.

Ella no apartó la mirada ni bajó sus ojos, pero un cambio sobrevino a su rostro —ese cambio en los músculos que a veces otorga una expresión infantil incluso a los más mayores—: algo que se da cuando uno ve que se ha dado demasiada importancia.

—¿Puedo acompañarla de regreso? —dijo Deronda amablemente, acercándose y ofreciéndole de nuevo su brazo. Ella lo tomó en silencio, y de esa forma se dejaron ver por Grandcourt, que estaba paseando tranquilamente por donde habían estado. Gwendolen se acercó a él y le dijo—: Ya estoy lista para que nos vayamos. El señor Deronda nos excusará ante Lady Mallinger.

—Por supuesto —dijo Deronda—. Lord y Lady Pentreath se fueron hace ya rato.

Grandcourt le ofreció el brazo en silenciosa conformidad, asintiendo sobre su hombro a Deronda, y Gwendolen se giró también un poco e inclinando la cabeza le dijo:

—Gracias.

Marido y mujer dejaron la galería y se fueron por los pasillos en silencio. Cuando cerraron la puerta al llegar al tocador Grandcourt se lanzó a una silla y dijo tajantemente:

—Siéntate.

Ella, esperando algo desagradable, había ya lanzado al aire su túnica de forma inconsciente y nerviosa, y obedeció inmediatamente. Volviendo sus ojos hacia ella, empezó:

—Hazme el favor en el futuro de no mostrar tus caprichos como una loca en el teatro.

—¿A qué te refieres? —dijo Gwendolen.

—Supongo que hay algún tipo de entendimiento entre tú y Deronda sobre esa cosa que llevas en la muñeca. Si tienes algo que decirle, díselo. Pero no utilices signos telegráficos para que no los vean los demás. Es asquerosamente vulgar.

—No tengo inconveniente en que lo sepas todo acerca de ese collar —dijo Gwendolen, resistiendo gracias a su orgullo y su enojo la pesadilla del miedo.

—No quiero saberlo. Puedes quedarte para ti todo lo que quieras.

Grandcourt iba haciendo pausas entre sus frases, y con cada una de ellas su discurso parecía adquirir una distinción excepcional en su expresión.

—Lo que quiera saber, lo sabré sin que me lo digas. Solo te pido que te comportes como mi mujer. Y no montes ningún espectáculo.

—¿Te importa que hable con Deronda?

Me importa un pepino Deronda, o cualquier otro parásito engreído. Puedes hablar con él tanto como quieras. No va a quitarme el puesto. Tú eres mi mujer. Y ocuparás tu puesto de forma adecuada, para el mundo y para mí, o te irás al diablo.

—Nunca he pretendido hacer otra cosa que no fuese ocupar mi puesto adecuadamente —dijo Gwendolen, con amarga mortificación en su interior.

—Te pusiste esa cosa en la muñeca, y me la mantuviste oculta hasta que quisiste que él la viera. Solo los tontos juegan a ese lenguaje de sordomudos, y piensan que es secreto. Entenderás que no puedes ponerte en ningún compromiso. Compórtate con dignidad. Eso es todo lo que tengo que decir.

Con estas últimas palabras, Grandcourt se levantó, volvió la espalda al fuego y la miró desde arriba. Ella permanecía en silencio. No hallaba ningún reproche con el que contraatacar por estas amonestaciones insultantes, y la razón misma por la que las encontraba insultantes era que su significado le afectaba directamente a su orgullo. Lo que menos deseaba hacer era quedar como una tonta y ponerse en compromiso. Era inútil e irrelevante intentar explicar que Deronda solo era para ella como un mentor —el mejor que había tenido—. Grandcourt se mostraba despectivo, no celoso; todos los asuntos los trataba con desdén. ¿Por qué ella no se revelaba y le desafiaba? Deseaba hacerlo. Pero tendría que poner a prueba también sus nervios y su pasión. Su marido tenía un ejército de espíritus a sus espaldas, que podía encerrarla siempre que ella se desviara. Quedó sentada con sus espléndidos atavíos, como una blanca imagen de desamparo y él parecía estar satisfecho de observarla en esta situación. Ella no podía ni lanzar una exclamación apasionada, o alzar sus brazos, como habría hecho en sus tiempos de doncella. La sensación de sentir su desprecio la mantenía inmóvil.

—¿Toco el timbre? —dijo él, tras lo que pareció una larga pausa. Ella movió la cabeza en señal de asentimiento, y tras tocar el timbre, se fue a su habitación.

Ella no podía quitarse de la cabeza ciertas palabras. «El mal que me ha hecho será su maldición». Mientras él cerraba la puerta, se le escaparon unas lágrimas amargas, y las perturbadoras palabras provocaron una respuesta: «¿Por qué has hincado tus dientes venenosos sobre mí y no sobre él?». Lo

exteriorizó en un susurro, mientras las lágrimas caían silenciosamente. Pero inmediatamente se frotó los ojos con su pañuelo, y controló sus sollozos.

Al día siguiente, recuperada del estremecedor ataque de la noche anterior, decidió que usaría el salvoconducto que Grandcourt le había despectivamente dado para hablar todo lo que quisiera con Deronda; pero no hubo ocasión, y rechazó por orgullo, que era ahora doblemente intenso, las argucias que se imaginaba para crear alguna oportunidad. No lo hacía por Deronda —curiosamente, ella no temía en absoluto que él pensara que su confianza en él careciese de dignidad: era parte de su poder sobre ella que le creyera libre de cualquier malentendido en la forma en que ella se dirigía a él; de hecho, que él la malinterpretara no le había entrado nunca en la cabeza. Pero llegó la última mañana, sin que hubiera sido capaz de hallar la menor oportunidad de hablar con él, y ya no se le ocurría cómo iba a hacerlo. Ella y Grandcourt se iban a ir a las tres. Era del todo irritante que, habiendo oído cómo se planificaba un paseo por los alrededores, Deronda no se presentara para unirse con ellos. Grandcourt se fue con Sir Hugo al Cerro del Rey, para ver los antiguos feudos de la casa; hubo otros caballeros que se fueron a disparar unos tiros; ella tuvo que ir y escuchar los reclamos y a los patos, y ver todo lo que no tenía ningunas ganas de ver, con las señoras, con el viejo Lord Pentreath y sus anécdotas, con el señor Vandernoodt y sus admiraciones. Estaba irritada al máximo: sin pensarlo, aprovechó que el camino era sinuoso para demorarse un poco y quedarse fuera de la vista de los demás, y así pudo volver a la casa, casi corriendo cuando ya no la veían. Entró por una puerta lateral, en la que quedaba la biblioteca a la izquierda; Deronda, sabía, estaba a menudo allí; ¿por qué no podía dirigirse a esa sala como a cualquier otra de la casa? La habían llevado antes allí expresamente para ver el árbol genealógico iluminado, y otras cosas remarcables —¿había algo más natural que ir a mirarlo de nuevo?—. Lo que más temía es que en la habitación no estuviese Deronda, pues la puerta estaba entreabierta. La empujó suavemente, y echó un vistazo. Estaba allí, ocupado escribiendo en una mesa del fondo, de espaldas a la puerta (de hecho, Sir Hugo le había pedido contestar unas cartas legislativas que se habían vuelto urgentes). Un tronco de leña enorme ardiendo, junto con el olor procedente del cuero de los libros, hacían de la habitación un lugar tan calurosamente acogedor como una capilla privada en la que hubieran estado oscilando los incensarios. Parecía muy osado el entrar —muy brusco el ir a hablarle e interrumpirle—; pero aún así entró por la silenciosa alfombra, y permaneció de pie unos dos o tres minutos, hasta que

Deronda, habiendo terminado una carta, la dejó aparte en espera de la firma, y se inclinó hacia atrás pensando si le quedaba alguna cosa por hacer, o si podía ir a caminar y ver si se encontraba con el grupo, que incluía a Gwendolen, cuando oyó su voz que decía:

—Señor Deronda.

Era realmente increíble. Se levantó apresuradamente, se giró, y empujó su silla con una rotunda expresión de sorpresa.

—¿Hago mal en entrar? —dijo Gwendolen.

—Pensaba que estaba usted lejos paseando —dijo Deronda.

—He vuelto —dijo Gwendolen.

—¿No quiere salir otra vez? Podría unirme con ustedes, si me permiten.

—No; quiero decirle una cosa, y no puedo permanecer aquí mucho tiempo —dijo Gwendolen, hablando rápidamente en voz baja, mientras se adelantó y apoyó sus brazos con su bolso en el respaldo de la silla que él acababa de apartar—. Quiero decirle que es realmente así, no puedo evitar sentir remordimientos por haber herido a otros. A eso es a lo que me refería cuando dije que había hecho algo peor que volver a apostar y a empeñar de nuevo el collar, algo más injurioso, parafraseándole a usted. Y no puedo hacerlo cambiar. He recibido mi castigo, pero no puedo cambiar nada. Usted dijo que podía hacer muchas cosas. Dígamelo otra vez. ¿Qué haría usted, qué sentiría, si estuviera en mi lugar?

La apresurada forma tan directa con la que habló, la ausencia de su sentido de la importancia, como si la preocupara solamente usar el tiempo en obtener una respuesta que la guiara, consiguió que su solicitud fuera indescriptiblemente conmovedora.

Deronda dijo:

—Sentiría algo de lo que usted siente, una pena profunda.

—¿Pero qué es lo que trataría de hacer? —dijo Gwendolen, con un apresuramiento urgente.

—Ordenar mi vida de forma que pudiera enmendar todo lo que fuera posible, y mantenerme lejos de provocar de nuevo cualquier tipo de injuria —dijo Deronda, dándose cuenta a su vez que el tiempo para una conversación era breve.

—Pero no puedo… no puedo; debo seguir —dijo Gwendolen, en un susurro alto y pasional—. He pasado por encima de los demás, me he aprovechado de ellos, lo he intentado, lo he intentado. Y debo seguir. No puedo cambiarlo.

Era imposible responder a esto al instante. Sus palabras habían confirmado sus conjeturas, y se le presentaron breves destellos de la situación de todos a los que afectaba. Sus sentimientos hacia aquellos que habían sido «pasados por encima» sancionaban sus remordimientos; no podía intentar anularlos, pero aún así su corazón estaba lleno de compasión hacia ella. Sin embargo, tan pronto como pudo respondió, amonestándole por sus últimas palabras:

—Eso es lo más amargo de todo, soportar el yugo de haber obrado mal. Pero ¿y si se somete a eso, de igual forma que los hombres aceptan una mutilación, o una larga vida con una enfermedad incurable? ¿Y si hiciera del mal inalterable un motivo para esforzarse más en hacer el bien que lo contrarreste? Quien ha cometido errores irremediables puede darse cuenta de forma más clara de esto. Hay muchos ejemplos. Sentir que hemos arruinado a alguien su vida puede hacernos evitar arruinar otras vidas.

—Pero usted no ha hecho daño a nadie ni les ha arruinado la vida —dijo Gwendolen, rápidamente—. Son los demás los que le han hecho daño a *usted*.

Deronda enrojeció ligeramente, pero dijo inmediatamente:

—Supongo que el preocuparnos por nosotros mismos puede hacer que nos acabemos preocupando por los demás, si, cuando estamos sufriendo profundamente consideramos que también ellos pueden estar pasando por una experiencia similar. Es una especie de remordimiento antes de hacer el mal. No sé si me entiende.

—Creo que sí… ahora —dijo Gwendolen—. Pero tenía usted razón: yo *soy* egoísta. Nunca me he parado a pensar en los sentimientos de los demás, salvo en los de mi madre. No me he preocupado de la gente. ¿Pero qué puedo hacer? —continuó, más rápido—. Tengo que levantarme por la mañana y hacer todo lo que hacen los demás. Es como seguir una danza establecida de antemano. Creo que preveo todo lo que va a suceder, y estoy cansada y harta de ello. Y el mundo me confunde totalmente —e hizo un gesto de disgusto—. Dice usted que soy ignorante. ¿Pero de qué sirve intentar saber más, cuando la vida no vale la pena?

—Precisamente —dijo enseguida Deronda, algo indignado y con cierta severidad, lo que pretendía utilizar como su propia salvaguarda—; la vida *sería* más valiosa para usted: algo de conocimiento real le haría interesarse por el mundo más allá del pequeño drama de sus deseos personales. Es la maldición de su vida, perdóneme, y de tantas otras vidas, encerrar la pasión en un pequeño círculo, y no extender las ideas y su comprensión a un campo

más amplio. ¿Tiene usted alguna sola ocupación por la que preocuparse de forma pasional o al menos con un interés independiente?

Deronda hizo una pausa, pero Gwendolen, que parecía asombrada y conmovida como si le hubieran dado una descarga eléctrica, quedó en silencio, y él continuó con más insistencia:

—Tomo como ejemplo lo que dijo usted de la música (que se aplica también a cosas más serias), usted no la estudiará por disfrutar privadamente de ella. ¿Cómo va el cielo o la tierra ofrecer riquezas espirituales a las almas empobrecidas con la pasividad? Si un solo firmamento no es capaz de captar nuestra atención y admiración, no veo cómo van a conseguirlo cuatro. Deberíamos dejar nuestra huella en cada uno de los mundos posibles con la simplicidad de nuestra insignificancia, que necesariamente es impía, sin fe ni solidaridad. El refugio que usted necesita de los problemas personales se encuentra en lo más alto, en la vida religiosa, que muestra un entusiasmo por algo más que nuestros propios apetitos y vanidades. Algunos pocos pueden encontrarlo simplemente elevando su pensamiento; pero para los demás, que tenemos que luchar por nuestra propia cordura, la vida superior se halla en una región en la que los afectos se revisten de conocimiento.

La medio indignante protesta que vibraba en la voz de Deronda, provenía, como suele suceder, de la costumbre de argumentar interiormente consigo mismo, más que de la intención de mostrarse severo con Gwendolen; pero tuvo sobre ella un efecto más beneficioso que cualquier otro consuelo. Nada es más débil que una queja pronunciada de forma indiferente; y enfrentarse a la autocrítica era algo constructivo. Por el momento, se sintió como una niña sacudida, que de los lamentos pasó al asombro, y dijo humildemente:

—Lo intentaré. Lo pensaré.

Ambos permanecieron en silencio durante un minuto, como si les hubiera envuelto una presencia ajena, pues también Deronda, se sentía bajo la presión que nos sobreviene cuando nuestras propias palabras se ciernen sobre nosotros, hasta que Gwendolen empezó de nuevo:

—Usted ha dicho que el afecto es la mejor solución, y yo apenas tengo, y nadie lo tiene por mí. Si pudiera, tendría el de mamá, pero eso es ya imposible. Las cosas han cambiado tanto en tan poco tiempo. Lo que antes no me gustaba, ahora lo añoro. Creo que casi me estoy apegando a las cosas antiguas, ahora que no las tengo. —Sus labios temblaban.

—Tómese el presente sufrimiento como una dolorosa oportunidad para aprender —dijo Deronda, más amablemente—. Es usted consciente de algo

más que de sus propias inclinaciones, sabe algo más de la forma en que su vida influye en otras, y la de los demás en la de usted. No creo que hubiera podido dejar de pasar por este proceso doloroso de una forma o de otra.

—Pero es una forma muy cruel —dijo Gwendolen, agitada, dando golpes con el pie en el suelo—. Me da miedo todo. Me doy miedo yo misma. Cuando se me calienta la sangre, soy capaz de hacer las cosas más atrevidas, conseguir cualquier objetivo; por eso tengo miedo hasta de mí misma. —No estaba mirando a nada fuera de ella, pero sus ojos se dirigían hacia la ventana, lo más lejos posible de Deronda, quien, comprendiéndola enseguida, dijo:

—Convierta su miedo en su salvaguarda. Intente que su temor incremente ese remordimiento que le es tan amargo. Medite sobre ello; la meditación es muy importante para definir nuestros anhelos y temores. No siempre estamos en un estado de fuerte emoción, y cuando estamos tranquilos podemos usar nuestros recuerdos y cambiar gradualmente el sentido de nuestros temores, igual que el de nuestros gustos. Haga de su miedo su salvaguarda. Es como tener la habilidad de captarlo todo enseguida. Eso puede hacer levantar reacciones muy pasionales. Intente dominar su sensibilidad, y usarla como si fuera una facultad, como la visión. —Deronda hablaba cada vez más rápido; le daba la sensación de que estaba aprovechando las últimas oportunidades de rescatarla de algún peligro indefinido.

—Sí, ya sé lo que quiere decir —dijo Gwendolen, en un susurro fuerte, sin volver los ojos, pero alzando su pequeña mano enguantada y agitándola como protestando contra la idea de que fuese fácil obedecer ese consejo—. Pero si surgieran ciertos sentimientos, el odio o la furia, ¿cómo puedo continuar siendo buena cuando surjan? Y si llegara un momento en el que me sintiera ahogada y no pudiera seguir soportándolo… —Se vino abajo, y con los labios temblorosos miró a Deronda, pero la expresión de su rostro le produjo un sentimiento totalmente nuevo. A él se le veía confuso, preguntándose si todo lo que había estado intentando inculcarle había caído en saco roto, si simplemente ella le había estado escuchando emocionada por uno de esos arrebatos suyos. Era como si la viera hundirse con sus miembros atados. La apenada compasión que mostraban sus rasgos mientras la observaba, la afectaron a ella con unos escrúpulos como no había sentido nunca, y con un nuevo tono de súplica dijo:

—Le estoy afligiendo. Soy muy desagradecida. Usted *puede* ayudarme. Pensaré en todo lo que me ha dicho. Haré el esfuerzo. Dígame, ¿le apenará a usted que me haya atrevido a hablarle de mis problemas? Fue usted el que

empezó, ya sabe, al reprocharme. —Sus labios mostraban una sonrisa melancólica al decir esto, pero añadió en un mayor tono de súplica—: ¿No le apenará a usted?

—No si eso sirve para salvarla de algo malo —dijo Deronda, con fuerte énfasis—; de otra forma, sí llevaré conmigo durante tiempo ese dolor.

—No, no, no será así. Puede que sea… no, seré mejor por haberle conocido. —Se volvió inmediatamente y abandonó la habitación.

Cuando subía el primer escalón de la escalera, Sir Hugo cruzó el recibidor camino de la biblioteca y la vio. Grandcourt no estaba con él.

En el momento en que el baronet entró, Deronda estaba de pie en su postura habitual, con las manos en el cuello de su gabardina, de espaldas a la mesa, y con esa expresión indefinible por la que juzgamos que un hombre todavía se halla en medio de la escena que acaba de pasar. Sin embargo, cambió de postura y comenzó a ordenar las cartas.

—¿Ha estado aquí la señora Grandcourt? —dijo Sir Hugo.

—Sí.

—¿Dónde están los demás?

—Creo que los dejó en algún lugar del campo.

Tras un momento de silencio, en el que Sir Hugo miraba a una carta sin leerla, dijo:

—Espero que no estés jugando con fuego, Dan, ya me entiendes.

—Creo que lo estoy haciendo, señor —dijo Deronda, tras dudar un instante, en el que refrenó cierta irritación—. Pero, siguiendo con su metáfora, no hay fuego y, por tanto, no hay peligro de quemarse.

Sir Hugo le miró minuciosamente y luego dijo:

—Mejor. Porque creo que entre nosotros, hay algo de pólvora escondida en relación con ese asunto.

Capítulo 37

Aspern:
Perdone, mi señor, quisiera hablar en nombre de Segismundo.
Fronsberg:
¿En su nombre? Oh, siempre tuve
un indulto para él; seguro que tarde o temprano
me lo devolverá. ¿Qué es lo que necesita?
¿Su loco proyecto no ha funcionado? ¿Sus bonitas alas mecánicas
no vuelan? ¿Cadena perpetua, al acecho del asalto,
billete para Epernay, ni una corteza que llevarse a la boca?
Aspern:
Oh, no es nada de eso, mi señor; se ha escapado
de las tropas de Circe, y busca conquistar el amor
de su dulce pupila Cecilia; pero quiere primero obtener
su consentimiento. Frunce usted el ceño.
Fronsberg:
Eminentes palabras.
Dije que tenía un indulto para él; no el consentimiento.

A PESAR DE LOS MOTIVOS DE DERONDA PARA QUERER VOLVER A LA CIUDAD, EN LOS que se mezclaba su preocupación por Mirah con su curiosidad por saber más del enigmático Mardoqueo, no consiguió subir antes que Sir Hugo, que se adelantó a su familia para estar listo para la apertura del Parlamento el 6 de febrero. Deronda se estableció en Park Lane, consciente de que sus dependencias serían vigiladas por Hans Meyrick. Esto es lo que esperaba: pero encontró otras cosas no del todo de acuerdo con sus expectativas.

La mayoría de nosotros recordará el grabado de Retzsch[181] acerca del destino en la forma de Mefistófeles jugando al ajedrez con el hombre por su alma, un juego en el que podemos imaginar al inteligente adversario disimulando con una serie movimientos no intencionados con el fin de que el engañado mortal aleje sus piezas defensivas del verdadero punto de ataque. El maligno se prepara con conciencia para burlarse de su blanco favorito, nos persuade de abandonar nuestro mejor refugio: incluso se entromete de tal manera que nos sugiere ponernos nuestros impermeables cuando sabe bien que el cielo va a clarear, previendo que los imbéciles sacarán como conclusión el tener manía a los impermeables en vez de estudiar con más detenimiento el tiempo. Es una buena prueba de la naturaleza de un hombre, cuando después de haberse esforzado en dotarse de lo que parece una buena

provisión, encuentra que toda su precaución es irrelevante, y que sus buenas intenciones no son mejores que unos malos cálculos porque han partido de un punto equivocado. Su magnanimidad le acaba llevando a la degeneración, y se siente llamado a ella. Algo de esto le pasaba a Deronda.

Su primera impresión fue de puro placer y diversión al encontrar su sala de estar transformada en un estudio cubierto de grabados misceláneos y con los contenidos de dos baúles que había traído de Roma, la parte inferior de las ventanas oscurecidas con un tapiz de fieltro, y al rubio Hans en su extravagante juventud como el genio que presidía ese revoltijo —su cabello más largo que antes, su cara más caprichosamente arrugada, y su elevado timbre de voz aumentando más aún bajo la excitación de un charla apresurada —. Los dos habían mantenido la amistad que tenían desde los memorables tiempos de Cambridge, no solo por correspondencia, sino además por pequeños episodios de camaradería en el extranjero y en Inglaterra, y la relación que mantenían desde el principio, de confianza por una parte y de indulgencia por la otra, no había hecho más que aumentar en la práctica, como suele ocurrir cuando estas relaciones de mutua entrega y acogida empiezan bien.

—Sabía que querías ver mis piezas y antigüedades —dijo Hans, después de los efusivos saludos iniciales y de las preguntas de rigor que se siguieron —, así que no tuve reparo en descargar mis baúles aquí. Pero he encontrado dos habitaciones en Chelsea a no muchos cientos de yardas de mi madre y mis hermanas, y pronto estaré listo para trasladarme allí, cuando hayan raspado las paredes y colocado algunas luces nuevas. Eso es todo lo que estoy esperando. Pero ya ves que no espero para empezar a trabajar: no puedes ni imaginarte lo grande que voy a ser. La semilla de la inmortalidad ha empezado a germinar en mí.

—Como si te creciera una seta, diría, ¿no sientes un malestar en los pulmones? —dijo Deronda, acostumbrado a tratar a Hans como a un hermano. Se acercó a unos grabados suspendidos de la repisa de los estantes; cinco bosquejos de una cara hechos de forma rápida, diferentes aspectos del mismo rostro. Se quedó a una distancia apropiada de ellos, sin hacer ninguna observación. También Hans estuvo un minuto en silencio; luego cogió su paleta y comenzó a dar pinceladas al dibujo que había sobre el caballete.

—¿Qué opinas de ellos? —dijo al fin.

—La cara vista de frente parece muy abultada; por otra parte, la semejanza entre los rostros es buena —dijo Deronda, con más frialdad de lo

que era habitual en él.

—No, no es muy abultada —dijo Hans decidido—. Ya me he dado cuenta de eso. Siempre sorprende pasar de un perfil al rostro entero. Pero haré una serie más amplia para Berenice[182]. Estoy haciendo una serie de Berenice, mira estos bosquejos de aquí, y ahora que lo pienso, tú eres el modelo que necesito para Agripa. —Hans, todavía con el pincel y la paleta en la mano, se había puesto al lado de Deronda al decir esto, pero añadió enseguida, como si fuera consciente de un error—: No, no, se me olvidaba; no te gusta estar sentado en tu retrato, ¡qué demonios! Sin embargo, creo que he conseguido un buen Tito. Habrá cinco en las series. La primera es Berenice abrazando las rodillas de Gessius Florus e implorando la salvación de su pueblo; eso ya lo tengo en el lienzo. Luego este, en el que ella aparece en el Xystus[183] con Agripa, pidiendo a la gente que no ofrezcan resistencia.

—Las piernas de Agripa no quedan bien —dijo Deronda.

—Pretenden ser piernas realistas —dijo Hans, arrugando la cara—; a los hombres públicos les tiemblan a menudo las piernas: «Sus piernas, el emblema de sus distintos pensamientos», como dijo alguien en *El Ensayo*[184].

—Pero estas piernas son tan imposibles como las del Alcibíades de Rafael[185] —dijo Deronda.

—Entonces serán piernas idealizadas —dijo Hans—. Las de Agripa eran piernas probablemente malas; yo las idealizo y las hago imposiblemente malas. El Arte, mi querido Eugenio, debe exagerar. Pero no importan las piernas ahora; el tercer bosquejo de la serie es Berenice entusiasmándose ante la perspectiva de ser la Emperatriz de Roma cuando llegan las noticias de que Vespasiano es declarado Emperador y que su amante Tito es su sucesor.

—Tienes que poner alguna nota al lado de su boca para que la gente lo entienda. No lo puedes explicar solo con la imagen.

—Les hará sentir su ignorancia, entonces, un efecto estético excelente. El cuarto es: Tito mandando fuera de Roma a Berenice después de haber compartido su palacio durante diez años, ambos tristes y a disgusto, *invitus invitam*, como dijo Suetonio[186]. He encontrado un modelo para el bruto romano.

—¿Harás que Berenice parezca de cincuenta años? Debía haber tenido esa edad.

—No, no; unos pequeños toques de madurez para mostrar el paso del tiempo. La belleza de ojos oscuros se conserva bien, especialmente la suya. Y

he aquí el quinto: Berenice sentada sola en las ruinas de Jerusalén. Eso es pura imaginación. Es lo que debería haber sido, y quizás fue. Mira cómo narro un declive patético. Nadie sabe lo que fue de ella: se indica sucintamente al cerrar la serie. No hay una sexta pintura. —Al decir esto, Hans pretendía hablar con una sensación anhelante de sublimidad, y alzó la cabeza hacia atrás con ligero fruncimiento, como si buscara en Deronda una expresión similar—. Irrumpo con un estilo Homérico; luego la historia se astilla, por así decir, y se disuelve tristemente en la nada, *le néant*[187]; ¿existe algo más sublime, sobre todo si se cuenta en francés? La persona vulgar querrá ver su cadáver y su entierro, quizás hasta su testamento y el reparto de sus túnicas. Pero, en fin, ven y mira este del caballete. Ya lo he comenzado.

—Esa actitud imploradora es realmente buena —dijo Deronda, tras contemplarla durante unos momentos—. Has sido muy productivo en las vacaciones de Navidad; ya que supongo que se te ocurrió el tema cuando llegaste a Londres. —Ninguno de los dos había mencionado todavía a Mirah.

—No —dijo Hans, dando alguna pincelada a su pintura—, ya había decidido el tema antes. Veo esa fantástica oportunidad como un presagio de que voy a descubrirme al mundo como un gran pintor. Vi a una mujer espléndida en el Trastévere[188] (las mujeres más grandes son medio judías), y me incitó a buscar un motivo sugestivo de una judía en Roma. Igual que otros hombres versados, terminé por escoger lo que había en la superficie. Te enseñaré un bosquejo de la cabeza de la trasteverina cuando pueda ponerme con eso.

—Creo que ella sería un modelo más apropiado para Berenice —dijo Deronda, sin saber cómo mostrar exactamente su desagrado.

—Ni hablar. El modelo debería ser la judía más hermosa del mundo, y ya la he encontrado.

—¿Estás seguro de que ella quiera ceder su imagen a ese personaje? No creo que a ninguna mujer le resulte más detestable. ¿Ya sabe ella lo que estás haciendo?

—Por supuesto. Conseguí que se pusiera precisamente en esta postura. Mi madrecita se sentó haciendo de Gessius Florus, y Mirah le abrazaba las rodillas. —En esto Hans se apartó un poco del dibujo y observó el efecto de sus pinceladas.

—Diría que ella no sabe nada de la historia de Berenice —dijo Deronda, sintiendo más indignación de la que habría sido capaz de justificar.

—Oh, sí, sí que lo sabe: la edición de las señoras. Berenice era un patriota ferviente, pero fue cegada por amor y ambición y se juntó con el enemigo: su pueblo. De ahí, el Némesis. Mirah se lo ha tomado como una parábola trágica, y llora al pensar lo que sufrió la pobre Berenice al regresar a pie a Jerusalén y sentarse desolada en su desconsuelo. Esa fue su propia frase. Luego no tuve valor para decirle que inventé esa parte de la historia.

—Enséñame tu Trasteverina —dijo Deronda, sobre todo para refrenarse de decir algo más.

—¿Le das un vistazo a ese carpesano de folios? —dijo Hans—. Mis estudios sobre los rostros están todos allí. Pero están desordenados. Quizás la encuentres al lado de un estudiante con las orejas pegadas a la cabeza.

Después de ojear uno o dos minutos los dibujos, Deronda dijo:

—Todo esto parecen rostros de Cambridge en cuerpos campestres. Quizás tendría que haber empezado por el otro lado.

—No; la encontrarás por el medio. Vacié un carpesano dentro de otro.

—¿Es este uno de tus estudiantes? —dijo Deronda, sosteniendo un dibujo —. Es un rostro inusualmente bello.

—¿Ese? Oh, es un hombre llamado Gascoigne, Rex Gascoigne. Un buen tipo, fuera de lo común; su labio superior es muy hermoso. Le estuve enseñando antes de que obtuviera su beca. Tendría que haber acabado la Pascua pasada. Pero se puso enfermo y tuvo que quedarse un año más. Tengo que averiguar qué es de él. Me gustaría saber cómo le ha ido.

—Aquí está, supongo —dijo Deronda, sujetando el bosquejo de la Trasteverina.

—Ah —dijo Han, mirándolo con cierto desdén—, demasiado ordinario. Todavía no me había reformado.

Deronda no dijo nada mientras cerraba el carpesano, dejando fuera la Trasteverina. Luego, sujetándose el cuello de su gabardina, y volviéndose hacia Hans, dijo:

—Es posible que mis escrúpulos sean excesivos, Meyrick, pero debo pedirte que me hagas el favor de abandonar esta idea.

Hans adoptó una actitud trágica, y gritó:

—¡Qué! ¿Mis series? ¿Mi serie inmortal de Berenice? Piensa lo que estás diciendo, hombre, destrozar, como dice Milton, no una vida, sino algo inmortal. Espera antes de contestar a que pueda dejar los instrumentos de mi arte y me estire de los pelos.

Y Hans dejó su pincel y su paleta, se dejó caer en una gran silla, y balanceándose hacia atrás, se frotó el pelo con sus dedos encorvados a cada lado de la cabeza, y miró con terror cómico a Deronda, que se vio obligado a sonreír mientras decía:

—Pinta tantas Berenices como quieras, pero me gustaría que estuvieras de acuerdo conmigo (tal vez lo estarás si reflexionas) que deberías escoger otra modelo.

—¿Por qué? —dijo Hans, levantándose y poniéndose serio de nuevo.

—Porque queda de tal manera que se le reconoce totalmente. La señora Meyrick y yo deseamos ardientemente que se la conozca como a una cantante admirable. Es justo, y ella así lo desea, que pueda ser independiente. Y tiene excelentes oportunidades. Ya tiene ganada una buena introducción. Y voy a hablar con Klesmer. Su rostro puede llegar a ser muy conocido, y bueno, no vale la pena seguir explicándolo, a menos que te des cuenta. Creo que si Mirah supiera todo esto, se negaría fuertemente a exhibirse de esa manera, no permitiría ser usada como modelo para una heroína de este tipo.

Mientras Hans escuchaba de pie con los pulgares en el cinturón de su blusa, su rostro mostraba una sorpresa creciente mezclada con algo de diversión, que al final dio lugar a una carcajada explosiva; pero viendo que Deronda parecía gravemente ofendido, se retractó y dijo:

—Perdona mi risotada, Deronda. Nunca antes me habías colocado en una posición superior a la tuya. Si hubieras dicho algo que no afectara a mis pinturas, me habría tragado cada una de mis palabras, solo porque tú lo dijeras. ¿Así que de verdad crees que mis cinco pinturas estarán colgadas en primera línea, y estudiadas cuidadosamente por el público? ¡Por Dios, hombre! Ni la sidra ni el engreimiento me dieron jamás un sueño tan hermoso. Mis pinturas van a permanecer con toda probabilidad tan privadas como pudiera desear la persona más hipersensible.

Hans se volvió para seguir pintando como un modo de llenar las incómodas pausas. Deronda seguía de pie sin moverse, reconociendo su error en cuanto a la publicidad, pero consciente también de que su repugnancia no había disminuido apenas. No estaba satisfecho ni consigo mismo ni con Hans; pero la facultad de permanecer tranquilo ayuda mucho a un hombre en los momentos de embarazo. Hans tenía en grado tan alto a su amigo que le hacía sentir una especie de vergüenza que Deronda se equivocase; pero no iba con su naturaleza abandonar algo enseguida, aunque fuera un capricho, o más bien, sobre todo si era un capricho, y añadió, mientras seguía pintando:

—Pero incluso suponiendo que tuviera a un público que devorara mis pinturas si fueran series de enfermeras, bebés o de cajitas adornadas, no veo que sea justa tu objeción. Cada pintor digno de ser recordado ha pintado el rostro que más admiraba, tan a menudo como podía. Es parte de su alma lo que entra en sus pinturas. Esa es la forma como difunde su estilo. Lo que odia, lo caricaturiza. Lo que adora, lo reviste de una forma sagrada, heroica. Si un hombre pudiera pintar a la mujer que ama mil veces como la *Stella Maris*[189] para animar a los marineros a bordo de mil barcos, tanto más honor para ella. ¿No es eso mejor que pintar un cuadro llamativo y presuntuoso y asignarle un nombre deificado?

—Cualquier objeción puede ser refutada si la consideras desde un punto de vista lo suficientemente amplio, Hans: no se puede establecer ninguna regla en ese sentido —dijo Deronda, con cierto aire perentorio—. Podría admitir todas tus generalidades, pero aun asi tendría razón al decirte que no deberías publicar el rostro de Mirah como modelo para Berenice. Pero voy a dejar de lado la cuestión de la publicidad. No he sido muy despierto en eso. —Deronda dudó unos momentos—. Con todo, incluso como asunto privado, es posible que hayan muy buenas razones para que no te complazcas demasiado pintándola desde el punto de vista que mencionas. Deberías ver que su situación actual es muy delicada; y hasta que no tenga su independencia, hay que cuidarla tan bien como a una pieza de cristal de Venecia, no sea que se aleje del lugar seguro en el que se aloja. ¿Estás completamente seguro de tu propia discreción? Perdóname, Hans. El que la haya encontrado yo me obliga a vigilarla. ¿Me entiendes?

—Perfectamente —dijo Hans, mostrando una sonrisa de buen humor—. Tienes la más que justificable opinión sobre mí de que voy a romper todos los cristales que se crucen en mi camino, además de mi propio cráneo. Es justo que pienses así. Desde que me metí en el lío de venir a este mundo, todo lo que más me ha gustado ha resultado ser algo perjudicial para mí o para alguien más. Todo lo que me he tomado demasiado en serio se ha acabado convirtiendo en un galimatías. La pintura es el último de ellos, y me voy a pasar el resto de mi vida para salir de él. Tú piensas ahora que la voy a armar en casa. No; me he regenerado. Crees que me he enamorado hasta los huesos de Mirah. Pues tienes razón. Pero te piensas que voy liarlo y a estropearlo todo. Ahí te equivocas, se entiende que lo hagas, pero estás del todo equivocado. He pasado por el bautismo de inmersión. Me protege la admiración. Pregunta a mi madrecita.

—¿No crees que esto puede ser un lío más, un amor sin esperanzas? —dijo Deronda, cuya voz parecía más profunda, en contraste con la de Hans, que había ido elevándose de tono.

—No considero que no tenga esperanzas —dijo Hans, con frialdad provocada, dejando sus herramientas, poniendo los pulgares en su cinturón y alejándose un poco, como si quisiera contemplar su pintura con más detenimiento.

—Mi querido amigo, lo único que vas a conseguir es sufrimiento —dijo Deronda con decisión—. Ella no se casaría con un cristiano, ni aunque lo amara. ¿Le has oído, claro que le has oído, hablar de su gente y de su religión?

—Eso no puede durar mucho —dijo Hans—. Verá que no hay un solo judío tolerable. Cualquier hombre de esa raza es insoportable, no hay quien los aguante.

—Puede que ella se una de nuevo con su familia. Eso es lo que anhela. Su madre y su hermano serán probablemente judíos estrictos.

—Me volveré prosélito si ella quiere —dijo Hans, encogiéndose de hombros y riendo.

—No digas tonterías, Hans. Pensaba que la amabas de verdad —dijo Deronda, acalorándose.

—Y así es. Crees que es desesperado, pero yo no.

—No sé nada. No sé lo que ha pasado. Es bueno estar preparado para las sorpresas. Pero apenas puedo imaginar una sorpresa más grande que hallar algo en los sentimientos de Mirah que te permitieran mantener una esperanza romántica. —Deronda tuvo la sensación de haber sido demasiado despectivo.

—Yo no fundo mis esperanzas románticas en los sentimientos de una mujer —dijo Hans, con la perversa tendencia a aparecer más alegre cuando se le hablaba con seriedad—. Baso mi romance en la ciencia y en la filosofía. La naturaleza designó a Mirah para que se enamorara de mí. Lo requiere la combinación de las razas, lo solicita la mitigación de la irregularidad humana, lo asegura la afinidad de contrastes. Soy el que más contrasta con Mirah: un cristiano blanqueado, que no puede entonar dos notas seguidas. ¿Quién tiene alguna oportunidad más que yo?

—Por fin me doy cuenta; todo era una mofa. No decías ni una sola palabra en serio, Meyrick —dijo Deronda, poniendo su mano sobre su hombro y hablando en un tono de cordial alivio—. He actuado como un sabiondo al responderte seriamente.

—Palabra de honor que voy en serio —dijo Hans, poniéndose frente a Deronda, y colocando su mano izquierda en su hombro, de modo que sus miradas quedaron enfrentadas muy de cerca. Te le estoy confesando todo. Quería decírtelo enseguida que vinieses. Mi madre dice que eres el custodio de Mirah, y ella se siente responsable ante ti por cada cosa que le sucede a Mirah en su casa. Bueno, la amo, la adoro, y no desespero, pretendo merecerla.

—Mi querido amigo, no puedes hacerlo —dijo Deronda rápidamente.

—Como te he dicho, lo quiero intentar.

—No eres capaz de mantener una decisión, Hans. También querías decidir hace tiempo lo que harías con tu madre y tus hermanas.

—Tienes razón en reprocharme, viejo —dijo Hans, amablemente.

—Tal vez sea un poco mezquino —dijo Deronda, aunque sin la intención de pedirle perdón—. Pero no es mezquindad por mi parte avisarte que estás albergando locas esperanzas quijotescas.

—¿Quién resultará herido sino yo, entonces? —dijo Hans, apretando los labios—. No voy a decirle nada a menos que esté seguro de la respuesta. No consultaré los oráculos: prefiero permanecer en alegres tinieblas, como diría Sir Thomas Browne. Prefiero arriesgarme aquí y perder que estar seguro de ganar en cualquier otra parte. Y no pienso beber el veneno de la desesperación, aunque estés dispuesto a ofrecérmelo. Estoy dejando el vino, así que déjame embriagarme un poco de esperanza y vanidad.

—Te lo digo de corazón, no te hará ningún bien —dijo Deronda, soltando el hombro de Hans, y dándole un empujoncito. Le hablaba amablemente, pero sus palabras solo provenían de sus labios. No dijo nada de sus sentimientos reales.

Era consciente de esa irritación particular que en ocasiones recae sobre un hombre al que los demás tienden a confiar como mentor —la irritación de percibir que debería sentirse totalmente libre de los deseos y tentaciones de los que advierte—. Queremos que nuestros guías estén libres de pecado, como si no pudieran ser los mejores maestros aquellos que solo un día antes se habían corregido de sus errores. A lo largo de su amistad con Hans, Deronda se había familiarizado con su egoísmo, pero nunca se había sentido intolerante con él: Hans solía vaciar sus sentimientos y contar todos sus problemas, pero no se preocupaba de interesarse en lo más mínimo por su interlocutor, y si alguna vez lo había hecho se le había olvidado enseguida, pero aún así Deronda se había mostrado tanto interior como exteriormente

indulgente, o incluso hasta satisfecho. Pero ahora se daba cuenta con cierta indignación, tanto más fuerte en cuanto que no podía confesarlo, el evidente supuesto que respecto a cualquier peligro de rivalidad o de celos con relación a Mirah, Deronda quedaba tan al margen de la cuestión como el ángel Gabriel. Una cosa es tomar la decisión de mantenerse al margen, y otra soportar que los demás la tomen por nosotros. Había esperado que Hans le diera problemas: lo que no había esperado es que esos problemas tuvieran una fuerte componente de sentimiento personal. Y se sentía algo avergonzado de que las esperanzas de Hans le provocaran desasosiego a pesar de su convicción bien fundada de que nunca se cumplirían. Habían inducido la imagen de un cambio en Mirah: y por mucho que se dijera que el cambio no se produciría, esa desagradable imagen persistía. En conjunto, el pobre Hans parecía estar saliéndose de los esquemas de Deronda, yendo más allá de lo que sería su parte de hijo pródigo rescatado, y suscitando un sentimiento muy distinto del afecto compasivo.

Cuando Deronda fue a Chelsea no se quedó tan tranquilo como debería haberle dejado la evidente menor preocupación de la señora Meyrick sobre su querido aunque impredecible hijo. Mirah parecía más animada que nunca, y por primera vez la vio reír. Fue cuando estaban hablando de Hans, siendo él naturalmente el tema preferido de su madre. Mirah quería saber si Deronda había visto al señor Hans hacer una especie de representación de varios personajes sin cambiarse de traje.

—Pasa de un personaje a otro como en un chasquido, y llegas a imaginártelos bien aunque no los veas —dijo Mirah, entusiasmada con el tema—; es tan rápido y lo hace tan bien… No me solían gustar las situaciones cómicas en el escenario, eran demasiado largas; pero el señor Hans se transforma en solo un minuto en un trovador ciego, luego en Rienzi[190] dirigiéndose a los romanos, luego en un bailarín de ópera, y por último en un joven caballero desesperado: logra que sienta lástima por todos, y aún así, que me ría al mismo tiempo —y en esto Mirah dejó escapar una pequeña risa que bien podía haber sido el inicio de una canción.

—Pensábamos que Mirah ya casi no podía reír hasta que vino Hans —dijo la señora Meyrick, viendo que Deronda, como ella, observaba con atención la hermosa escena.

—Hans parece estar en un gran momento ahora —dijo Deronda, en un tono alegre—. No me extraña que la haya animado.

—Ha estado magnífico desde que vino —dijo la señora Meyrick, guardándose para sí el resto de la frase: «a ver si le dura».

—Soy muy feliz —dijo Mirah—, al ver que el hijo y hermano venga a esta querida casa. Estuve oyendo todo el rato cómo hablaban de lo que hacían juntos cuando eran pequeños. Es como estar en el cielo, tener una madre y un hermano que hablan de esa manera. Yo nunca los he tenido.

—Yo tampoco —dijo Deronda, involuntariamente.

—¿No? —dijo Mirah sentidamente—. Ojalá los hubiera tenido. Ojalá hubiera tenido usted todo lo que es bueno. —Había dicho las últimas palabras con sentido ardor, como si hubieran formado parte de una letanía, mientras mantenía su mirada fija en Deronda, el cual, con el codo en el respaldo de su silla, la contemplaba con nuevos ojos, los de la impresión que había causado en Hans, y la posibilidad de que a ella le atrajera ese extraordinario contraste. Ocurría lo mismo que en otras visitas anteriores, que Mirah disfrutaba tanto hablando de lo que sentía como una joven chiquilla que de repente podía contar todo lo que durante mucho tiempo había querido y había tenido que reprimir. Por primera vez en su vida Mirah se hallaba entre personas en las que confiaba del todo, y mantenía su impresión romántica inicial de que Deronda era un mensajero enviado del cielo, pues su imagen tranquila renovaba en ella su disposición a abrirse y confiar. Gracias a ello, pasó de su dependencia impotente a una atención admiradora por parte de todos sin que sintiera los efectos de una adulación nociva: todos los que la rodeaban prestaban atención a sus miradas y a sus palabras, pero el efecto que esto produjo en ella era solamente el de haber pasado de un encierro sofocante al aire libre exultante, y se sentía a gusto entre la conversación y la acción. Para ella, todo provenía de la bondad de los demás. Pero esa palabra de Deronda que implicaba que había tenido una carencia en su vida comparable a la suya, le hizo pensar sobre él bajo un nuevo punto de vista. Tras su primera impresión de apenada sorpresa, prosiguió:

—Pero el señor Hans dijo ayer que usted pensaba tanto en los demás que apenas deseaba nada para usted. Nos contó una maravillosa historia de Buda ofreciéndose a sí mismo como comida para la tigresa hambrienta, salvándola a ella y a sus cachorros de morir de hambre. Y nos dijo que usted era como Buda. Así es como le imaginamos todos.

—Le ruego que no imagine eso —dijo Deronda, que encontraba tales suposiciones algo exasperantes—. Incluso aunque fuera verdad que pienso tanto en los demás, no se seguiría de ahí que no deseo nada para mí. Cuando

se dejó comer por la tigresa, Buda debió haber sentido también mucha hambre.

—Quizás si él tenía también mucha hambre no le importaría mucho ser comido —dijo Mab tímidamente.

—Por favor, no lo pienses así, Mab; así se pierde la belleza de la acción —dijo Mirah.

—¿Pero y si fuera cierto, Mirah? —dijo la racional Amy, haciendo una pausa en su estudio—. Siempre consideras lo bello como verdadero.

—Y así es —dijo Mirah amablemente—. Si la gente ha pensado lo más hermoso y mejor, debe ser cierto. Siempre es así.

—¿A qué te refieres, Mirah? —dijo Amy.

—Yo la entiendo —dijo Deronda, viniendo al rescate—. Es una verdad en el pensamiento aunque nunca se haya llevado a cabo en la acción. Vive como una idea. ¿No es eso? —se volvió hacia Mirah, que estaba escuchando y cuyos hermosos ojos mostraban una mirada absorta.

—Debe ser eso, puesto que usted me entendió, pero yo no logro explicarme del todo —dijo Mirah, un poco abstraída—, buscando todavía alguna expresión.

—¿Pero fue hermoso para Buda dejarse comer por el tigre? —dijo Amy, cambiando el punto de vista—. Sería un mal ejemplo.

—El mundo se llenaría de tigres gordos —dijo Mab.

Deronda se rio, pero defendió el mito.

—Es como una palabra apasionada —dijo—; la exageración proviene del fervor. Es una imagen extrema de lo que pasa cada día: la transformación de uno mismo.

—Creo que ya puedo explicar lo que quiero decir —dijo Mirah, que no había estado escuchando la última parte de la conversación. Cuando pensamos en lo mejor, es como lo que mi madre ha sido para mí. Ha sido tan real como la demás gente lo ha sido para mí, incluso más real.

Deronda, apenándose en su interior bajo esta ilustración, que traía vivamente consigo otras posibles realidades acerca de la madre, cambió la conversación diciendo:

—Pero no debemos alejarnos de los asuntos prácticos. He venido por una cosa, para contarles una entrevista que mantuve ayer, y que espero Mirah encuentre útil para ella. Fue con Klesmer, el gran pianista.

—¿Ah sí? —dijo la señora Meyrick con satisfacción—. ¿Usted cree que la ayudará?

—Eso espero. Está muy ocupado, pero ha prometido fijar un día para recibir y oír a la señorita Lapidoth, como debemos acostumbrarnos a llamarla —al decir esto Deronda sonrió a Mirah—, si ella consiente en ir a verle.

—Estaré muy agradecida —dijo Mirah tranquilamente—. Quiere oírme cantar antes de valorar si me puede ayudar.

A Deronda le sorprendió con qué sencillez trataba estos asuntos prácticos.

—No será una prueba para usted, espero, si la señora Meyrick amablemente le acompaña a casa de Klesmer.

—Oh no, no será ninguna prueba. Lo he estado haciendo toda la vida, quiero decir, que siempre me han dicho que haga cosas para que otros me valoren. Y ya he pasado por juicios negativos. Estoy preparada para soportarlo y que no me afecte. ¿Es Klesmer un hombre severo?

—Es peculiar, pero no le he tratado tanto como para saber si es lo que usted llamaría severo. Sé que tiene buen corazón, al menos lo muestra en sus acciones, si no en su conversación.

—Estoy acostumbrada a que se me mire con el ceño fruncido y no a que se me alabe —dijo Mirah.

—De vez en cuando, Klesmer frunce bastante el ceño —dijo Deronda—, pero muestra mientras a menudo una especie de sonrisa en sus ojos. Desgraciadamente, lleva anteojos, así que tendrá que sorprenderle desde un ángulo concreto para ver la sonrisa.

—No me asusta —dijo Mirah—. Aunque fuera como un león rugiente, solo quiere oírme cantar. Haré lo que pueda.

—Entonces estoy seguro que no le importará ser invitada a cantar en el salón de Lady Mallinger —dijo Deronda—. Quiere pedírselo para el mes que viene, e invitará a muchas damas a escucharla, las cuales probablemente quieran que sus hijas tomen lecciones con usted.

—¡Qué pronto vamos a encumbrarnos! —dijo la señora Meyrick encantada—. Nunca pensaste en triunfar tan rápido, Mirah.

—Me asusta un poco que se me llame señorita Lapidoth —dijo Mirah, enrojeciendo con nueva inquietud—. ¿Se me podría llamar Cohen?

—La entiendo —dijo Deronda enseguida—. Pero, se lo digo en serio, no puede ser llamada Cohen. El nombre es inadmisible para una cantante. Es una de las tonterías que debemos aceptar de los prejuicios vulgares. Podríamos escoger cualquier otro nombre, sin embargo, tales como los que escogen los cantantes, un nombre italiano o español, que se adapte a su físico. —Para

Deronda en esos momentos el nombre de Cohen era equivalente al más feo de los distintivos.

Mirah reflexionó un poco, ansiosamente, y luego dijo:

—No. Si Cohen no sirve, mantendré el nombre por el que se me conoce. No me esconderé. Tengo amigos que me protegen. Y si mi padre estuviera muy empobrecido y necesitara ayuda… no —dijo mirando a la señora Meyrick—, pienso a veces que quizás esté llorando como en ocasiones le veía, sin nadie consolándole, y yo me he escondido de él. No tiene a nadie excepto a mí. Los que se hacían amigos de él siempre le abandonaban.

—Mantén el nombre que te parezca, querida niña —dijo la señora Meyrick—. Yo no te voy a convencer de lo contrario. —Pero por ella, que no tenía paciencia ni compasión por ese padre, le habría dejado llorando.

Deronda se estaba diciendo: «He sido bastante miserable al enfadarme con Hans. ¿Cómo no va a enamorarse de ella? Pero es demasiado presuntuoso y absurdo por su parte acariciar la idea de apropiársela, y una especie de blasfemia suponer que ella posiblemente se entregará a él».

¿Qué pasaría si fuera a Daniel Deronda al que le asaltaran tales pensamientos? No era alguien que pudiera introducirse inocentemente adonde había prohibido a su amigo entrar, pero era innegable que lo que acababa de suceder había hecho aumentar un buen grado sus sentimientos hacia Mirah. Pero dejando aparte otros motivos para la autorepresión, había razones que eran a la vez definitivas e imprecisas y que le hicieron apartar la cuestión de la misma forma que habría abandonado un escrito a medias en que su imaginación le hubiera llevado demasiado lejos y hubiera dado una forma muy precisa a sus presentimientos. ¿No vendría nunca una revelación que arrojara luz en su propio recorrido? ¿Qué es lo que realmente sabía de su origen? Curiosamente, durante estos últimos meses, en los que parecía correcto que ejerciera su voluntad en la elección de un destino, la pasión de su naturaleza se había bloqueado cada vez más con esta incertidumbre. La revelación podía venir con dolor, de hecho, él lo daba casi por supuesto, pero ¿y si le ayudaba a que su vida tomara la forma de un deber, y si libraba de tener que hacer una elección arbitraria entre cosas que no deseaba una más que otra? Y aún más, deseaba escapar de esa imagen de crítico de las actividades de los hombres, encasillado en la actitud ridícula de superioridad autoasignada. Su traba principal era su temprano afecto hacia Sir Hugo, que le obligaba a mostrarse deferente y agradecido hacia ideas que apenas compartía; pero a veces le asaltaban dudas sobre este agradecimiento hasta el

punto de temer mostrarse desagradecido. Muchos de nosotros nos quejamos de que la mitad de nuestros derechos de nacimiento son deberes arduos: Deronda tendía más a quejarse de que le habían robado esa mitad; con todo, se reprochaba, como se lo habría reprochado a cualquiera, de ser muy pretencioso y no acabar de resolver las cosas. Era el reverso de ese tipo definido en los personajes de Faulconbridge y Edmund de Gloster[191], que se aprovechaban de las desgracias accidentales para incrementar su burda ambición por el éxito personal. Para Daniel las palabras Padre y Madre llevaban el fuego del altar en ellas; y el resto de las relaciones más estrechas que ofrece la naturaleza mantenía todavía para él el poder místico que le había hecho acalorarse de niño. El hombre común puede pensar que esta sensibilidad sobre el nacimiento es ridícula y apenas creíble; pero con todo el respeto sobre su discernimiento, como la roca de la que parte el resto de su conocimiento, este hombre común que piensa así debe admitir que muchos hechos bien probados le son oscuros, incluso las acciones de su propio corazón o la estructura de su propia retina. Hacía un siglo, ni él ni sus antepasados tenían la más ligera idea de las descargas eléctricas que actuaban sobre sus cuerpos, de la misma forma que no eran conscientes de la angustia solitaria en la que viven muchos hombres de sensibilidad excepcional descuidados cuando eran pequeños.

Tal vez estas cosas habían fermentado aún más en la mente de Deronda al no haber tenido nunca un confidente a quien revelar estos temas delicados. Siempre había sido él el que había puesto el hombro en vez de descansar en el hombro de otro. En ocasiones había anhelado tener al tipo de amigo con quien pudiera descubrir su experiencia: un joven como él que soportara una aflicción privada y no estuviera muy seguro de su propia carrera; lo suficientemente especulativo para entender cualquier dificultad moral, pero socialmente susceptible, como lo era él, y con todos los signos exteriores de equilibrio tanto en lo que se refiere al forcejeo corporal como en el espiritual, pues consideraba que era imposible intercambiar confidencias con alguien que le admirara demasiado. Pero no se había hecho ilusiones de encontrar al amigo que imaginaba. La de Deronda no era una de esas naturalezas temblorosas que se prestaban al sexto sentido.

Capítulo 38

> Hay quienes mantienen que la peor tragedia de Prometeo es que estuviera encadenado no después sino antes de robar el fuego celeste por la νάρθηξ[192] para ser entregado a los mortales: impulsado por el Kratos y Bia[193] de métodos fundados en la soledad de ideas menospreciadas, atado en un palpitante desamparo por la presión horrible de la pobreza y la enfermedad —una soledad por las que muchos pasan, pero ninguno mira—.

MUCHOS SE DISPUTAN EL TERRENO DEL «SEXTO SENTIDO». PERO ES UN ASUNTO sabido que hay personas cuyas ansias, concepciones —no, más aún, sus experimentadas conclusiones— continuamente toman la forma de imágenes que tienen un poder de presagiar lo que sucederá: las hazañas que realizarán se presentan ante ellos en su forma completa, conformando una estampa dominante; el suceso que ansían o que temen se alza en una visión ante ellos como el crecimiento de una semilla, alimentándose rápidamente con innumerables impresiones. No siempre son los menos capacitados en el proceso argumentativo, ni menos cuerdos que los calculadores comunes del mercado: sucede a veces que sus naturalezas tienen múltiples aberturas, como la Tebas de las cien puertas[194], donde naturalmente puede producirse una invasión mayor y más variada que a través de un estrecho portal vigilado. Sin duda hay especímenes abyectos entre los visionarios, igual que existen mamíferos diminutos que podrías encerrar entre los dedos de un guante. Ese pequeño pariente del elefante no puede hacer ningún daño; pero ¿qué especie, por grande y organizada que esté, está libre de especímenes cuya insignificancia es a la vez desagradable y nociva? Da miedo pensar todo lo que la palabra «patriota» abarca; o en los codazos que podrá haber el día del juicio entre los que se han distinguido como autores, llevando volúmenes de tomos bien en sus manos o en carretillas.

Hemos realizado esta apología sobre el parentesco inevitable para arrojar luz sobre algunos hechos sobre Mardoqueo, cuya imagen se había metido en la mente de Deronda como una nueva pregunta por la que sentía interés en ser respondida. Pero el interés no consistía más que en un suspense vagamente expectante: el judío de apariencia tísica, que aparentaba ser un fervoroso estudioso de algún tipo, destacando por algún trabajo de artesanía, como Spinoza, no encajaba en ninguna de las expectativas de Deronda.

A Mardoqueo el encuentro le produjo un efecto contrario. Durante muchos inviernos, mientras iba siendo consciente de que su vida física menguaba y su soledad espiritual aumentaba, todos sus deseos pasionales se concentraron en las ansias de encontrar un oído joven sobre el que derramar sus conocimientos como testamento, alguna alma gemela que aceptara el producto espiritual de su breve y dolorosa vida, como una misión a realizar. Era remarcable que el optimismo, que a menudo es una ilusión beneficiosa para los enfermos tísicos, se hallaba separado en Mardoqueo de las expectativas de recuperarse físicamente y se centraba solo en este anhelo por realizar su transmisión. Este anhelo, que venía de superar desilusiones aplastantes, había crecido en una esperanza, la esperanza en una creencia confiada, que en lugar de ser refrenada por la clara concepción que tenía de su apresurado declive, tomó más bien la intensidad de una fe expectante en una profecía que necesitaba solo poco espacio para llevarse a cabo.

Habían pasado ya años desde que había empezado a fijarse en las personas con una mirada profunda, buscando en ellos alguna traza de lo que pudiera ser una concepción diferente. Buscaba esa diferencia principalmente por un método de contraste: quería encontrar un hombre que fuera diferente a él. Al intentar esbozar rasgos que definieran a ese hombre a partir de las negativas con que se había encontrado y los obstáculos que le habían asediado, se imaginaba a un hombre que tuviera todos los elementos necesarios para simpatizar con él, pero en un cuerpo totalmente distinto al suyo: tenía que ser un judío, intelectualmente culto, moralmente férvido —una naturaleza que en todo esto encajaba con la de Mardoqueo—; pero su rostro y su figura debían ser hermosos y fuertes, debía estar versado en todos los refinamientos de la vida social, su voz debía fluir correcta y sencilla, sus circunstancias estar libres de necesidades sórdidas; debía glorificar las posibilidades del judío, no sentarse o deambular como lo hacía Mardoqueo, soportando la marca de su pueblo entre signos de pobreza y lamentos. Sensible como era a los rasgos físicos, había mirado, tanto en el extranjero como en Inglaterra, a retratos y a hombres, y si le sobraba alguna hora, se detenía a veces en la Galería Nacional, buscando pinturas que alimentaran su optimismo con rostros de hombres nobles y serios, tales como los que bien podrían pertenecer a su propia raza. Pero volvía decepcionado. Los ejemplos son muy escasos y están muy esparcidos por las galerías de Europa, donde el destino o incluso la selección de los principales artistas ha dado al Arte un rostro a la vez joven, espléndido y hermoso, en el que si hay algo de

melancolía, no es por pasividad impotente, sino que es porque se aventura en la capacidad vaticinadora del heroísmo.

Algunas personas observadoras podrían recordar tal vez su aspecto demacrado y sus ojos oscuros hundidos mientras permanecía ante un cuadro que le provocaba una meditación nueva o de las habituales: normalmente llevaba una gorra de tela forrada de piel negra, que ningún pintor le habría pedido que se quitara. Pero los curiosos lo considerarían a buen seguro como un judío de aspecto extraño, que probablemente obtenía dinero gracias a las pinturas; y Mardoqueo, cuando los veía, se daba perfecta cuenta de la impresión que causaba. Era mórbidamente consciente, pues la experiencia se lo había demostrado, que la pobreza de un hombre, además de otras desventajas físicas, desvalorizaban sus ideas, a menos que fueran las de un Pedro el Ermitaño[195], que era alguien que atraía al gentío. Pero era demasiado cuerdo y generoso para atribuir su destierro espiritual solamente a los prejuicios excusables de los demás: ciertas incapacidades suyas le habían acabado excluyendo; y así es como su imaginación había construido otro hombre de miras más anchas que esa segunda alma, según la noción de los cabalistas[196], para ayudar a la primera, que era insuficiente, a llevar una vida floreciente, dispuesta a incorporar todo lo que más valía la pena de una existencia cuya parte visible y palpable se iba esfumando rápidamente. Su necesidad interna por concebir esta prolongación o expansión de sí mismo se manifestaba como una necesidad externa. Los pensamientos de su corazón (esa frase ancestral es la que mejor ensombrece la verdad) le parecían demasiado valiosos, demasiado ligados con el crecimiento de las cosas para no tener un destino importante. Y cuanto de una forma más fuerte y hermosa concebía en su mente esa prolongación de sí mismo, más la quería de antemano con un afecto en el que se reconocía en parte a sí mismo, pero que también tenía su parte de contemplación y agradecimiento.

La mente de Mardoqueo forjaba constantemente tantas imágenes que la sucesión coherente de sus pensamientos se asemejaba a menudo a los sueños significativos que las personas despiertas en sus momentos de mayor inventiva atribuyen a los durmientes; o más aún, se asemejaba a la forma en que los sueños genuinos atravesaban el umbral de lo conocido a lo desconocido. Así, durante mucho tiempo, pensaba normalmente en el Ser que respondía a su necesidad como alguien acercándose desde la distancia o dándole la espalda, oscuramente retratado bajo un cielo dorado. Creía realmente en un cielo dorado. Se sentía muy atraído por ciertos aspectos

poéticos de Londres; y uno de sus pasatiempos favoritos, si le quedaban fuerzas y tiempo, era asomarse por alguno de sus puentes, especialmente al amanecer o al ocaso. Incluso cuando se hallaba inclinado sobre las ruedecillas de un reloj o sobre cualquier otra bagatela, o sentado en una de las habitaciones pequeñas de arriba mirando a través de los ladrillos mal puestos y de las ventanas cuarteadas, su imaginación se plantaba espontáneamente en algún lugar con un amplio horizonte; sus pensamientos siempre buscaban los espacios amplios; y siempre que le era posible, intentaba beneficiarse de la influencia de un cielo extenso. Apoyado sobre el parapeto del Puente de los Frailes Negros mientras meditaba con la mirada perdida, la envergadura y la calma del río, con sus partes neblinosas y sus partes luminosas, las grandes masas empañadas que daban forma a los grandes edificios, signo del mundo del comercio, los botes y las barcazas acercándose desde la tranquila lejanía descubriendo su sonido y su color, impregnaban su estado de ánimo y se fundían indistinguiblemente con su pensamiento, como una bella melodía que con solo escucharla eleva nuestro espíritu. Sucedía así que la figura representativa del anhelo de Mardoqueo la veía mentalmente oscurecida por el exceso de luz que había a su alrededor. Pero tras el inevitable progreso de su imaginación en busca de detalles más precisos, dejó de ver la figura dándole la espalda. Comenzó a avanzar, y su rostro se volvió reconocible; las palabras juventud, belleza, buen gusto, nacimiento judío, seriedad noble, pasaron de la forma individual a la general, reunidas por sus recuerdos de los rostros vistos entre los judíos de Holanda y Bohemia, y de los retratos que avivaban esos recuerdos. Digamos reverentemente de esta necesidad espiritual madura que era semejante a la de la chica o el chico que se imaginan a su futuro amado o amada; pero el apasionamiento de tales jóvenes deseos son débiles comparados con la corriente apasionada de una vida ideal que lucha por encarnarse, intensificada por su resistencia a su disolución inminente. La forma visionaria se convirtió en un compañero y un oyente, ocupando su lugar no solo en la imaginación despierta, sino también en esos letargos de sueño ligero en los que en verdad puede decirse: «Duermo, pero mi corazón está despierto», cuando la conmovedora historia trivial del día anterior refleja el propósito apasionado de años.

Últimamente, el apremio del tiempo irredimible, medido por la asfixia gradual de la vida, había transformado la confianza de Mardoqueo en una espera agitada del cumplimiento que debía estar ya a mano. ¿Estaban las campanas a punto de repicar, la sentencia a punto de ejecutarse? Los pasos del

libertador tenían que estar cerca —del libertador que debía rescatar el duro trabajo espiritual de Mardoqueo del olvido y situarlo en un puesto perdurable en la herencia de su gente. Incluso si sus ideas hubieran sido tan verdaderas y valiosas como las de Colón o Newton, muchos habrían juzgado este anhelo como una exageración desequilibrada de su propio valor, así como el hecho de considerar que el acto más sublime de un hombre sea decir: «Si no yo, entonces otro», desvalorizando el sentido de su propia vida. Pero los hombres más íntegros desean ser agentes, crear, y no solamente ser espectadores: un gran deseo de bendecir, no de ser bendecidos. Y mientras haya calor suficiente en el sol para alimentar una vida llena de energía, habrá todavía hombres que sientan: «Soy el responsable del cambio de este momento, y dejaré en ello mi alma».

Pero a pesar de esa mezcla de inconsecuencia que todos nosotros compartimos, sin que sea motivo de desgracia, pues nos salva de muchas consecuencias de las equivocaciones, la confianza de Mardoqueo en que viniera este amigo no le había hecho permanecer pasivo, sino que intentó usar los recursos, patéticamente humildes, que tenía a su alcance, para comunicar algo de sí mismo. Hacía ya dos años que se alojaba bajo las dependencias de Esdras Cohen, donde de buena fe le consideraban una mezcla de trabajador, maestro, pozo de caridad, zopenco genial, piadoso y (cuando se le preguntaba) hereje peligroso. Durante ese tiempo el pequeño Jacob se había hecho mayor como para llevar knickerbockers[197], así como para adquirir esa rapidez en recelar que se había hecho ya manifiesta en relación con las baratijas y el intercambio. Había avanzado también en su apego a Mardoqueo, considerándolo como un inferior, pero sin dejar de quererlo ni un ápice, y aprovechando su útil inteligencia como podría haber tomado los servicios de un genio de una lámpara. En cuanto a Mardoqueo, había dado sus primeras lecciones a Jacob, y había volcado con facilidad su ternura habitual en la paternidad de un maestro. Aunque era plenamente consciente de la distancia espiritual que había entre los padres y él, y no habría intentado nunca comunicarles nada de su mundo peculiar, el niño le conmovía con ese afecto idealizador que asocia las cualidades de un chico concreto con la gloria de la niñez y las posibilidades de un largo futuro. Y este sentimiento le había arrastrado, al principio sin premeditación, y después plenamente consciente, a dejar que el chico escuchara lo que habría sido considerado como demasiado descabellado para cualquier hombre importante de negocios que lo hubiera escuchado. Pero nadie lo oía cuando Jacob subía a la habitación de

Mardoqueo, por ejemplo, un día en el que había poco trabajo por hacer, o a una hora en la que había terminado el trabajo, y tras una breve lección de lectura inglesa o de matemáticas, se veía incitado a permanecer en las rodillas del profesor, o a saltar a caballo sobre ellas, a menudo a costa de la paciente fatiga de sus miembros desgastados. El reclamo era tal vez el remiendo de un juguete o algún pequeño aparato mecánico con el que Mardoqueo mostraba su excepcional habilidad con las bien entrenadas yemas de sus dedos; y teniendo atado de esta forma al chico, empezaba a repetir un poema hebreo suyo, sobre el que había vertido unos años antes sus primeros ardores juveniles por esa concepción, que era la dueña de su alma, de un pasado y un futuro fusionados, diciéndole a Jacob que repitiera sus palabras.

«El chico las conservará grabadas dentro de él —pensaba Mardoqueo—; es una forma de tenerlas impresas».

Nadie estaba más preparado que Jacob para este juego fascinante de repetir palabras ininteligibles; y si no sucedía ninguna otra diversión, a veces prolongaba el juego hasta que a su maestro se le acababa el aliento. Pues Mardoqueo ponía en cada repetición el fervor propio de un acto sagrado. En tales ocasiones, Jacob no se distraía más que para alcanzar y explorar los contenidos de sus bolsillos; o para estirarse la piel de sus mejillas para que sus ojos parecieran horribles, ladeando la cabeza para completar el efecto; o para manosear su propia nariz y la de Mardoqueo como si quisiera comparar la relación entre sus tamaños. Ante todo esto, el fervoroso recitador no se detenía, satisfecho si los jóvenes órganos del habla quedaban libres para cumplir su función. Pero sucedía a menudo que un impulso repentino llevaba a Jacob a saltar de sus rodillas al descubrir alguna diversión antigua o posible, y en vez de seguir con la recitación, repetía palabras anteriores que le venían a la cabeza, declamándolas atropelladamente, acompañándose de gestos que imitaban la pasión que había puesto en algún verso Mardoqueo. Aun asi, esperaba con la paciencia de un profeta, y retomaba a la mañana siguiente sin desánimo su peculiar manera de dejar impreso en el chico sus poemas, diciéndose para sí:

«Tal vez mis palabras le guíen algún día. Puede que entonces descubra su significado. Sucede así con una nación… después de muchos días».

En esto, Jacob recibió un set de artículos mágicos gracias al cual aumentó su sensación de poder y animó su tiempo libre, haciendo cacarear al bebé, o llevando al enorme gato a un rincón oscuro, o pensando que asustaría a cualquier cristiano de su edad. Hubo una semana, que desgraciadamente, vio

a un charlatán callejero, lo que le llevó a deformar su imitación muscular de la poesía hebrea moderna según el modelo de Yehudah Haleví[198]. Mardoqueo había llegado a un pasaje fresco de su poema; pues tan pronto como Jacob se había acostumbrado a un fragmento, era conducido hacia otro, y lo que más le retenía durante varios minutos más era la fresca combinación de sonidos. La voz tísica, originalmente de un fuerte barítono, con su variedad de carraspeos entremezclados, como la bruma entre la claridad, y sus ocasionales e incipientes jadeos, añadían ese día una diversión mayor, emitiendo versos hebreos con un significado parecido a este:

Lejos de mí la envoltura del olvido,
marchitando el corazón;
el aceite y el vino prensado por los Goyim[199],
envenenados con el desprecio.
La soledad rodea al Monte Nebo[200],
su corazón es una tumba:
allí el Arca Sagrada enterrada y los querubines de oro
iluminan la oscuridad:
allí los rostros solemnes observan inalterados,
las alas se extienden enteras:
cerrada por un horrible discurso silencioso
la Ley está esculpida.
La soledad y la oscuridad son mi refugio,
y mi corazón una tumba;
golpéalo y quebrántalo, ¡oh Gabriel!
Hazlo pedazos como la arcilla del fundador
alrededor de la imagen dorada.

En el entusiasmo absorto con el que Mardoqueo había entonado más que pronunciado esta última invocación, no se dio cuenta de que Jacob ya no le seguía y había saltado de sus rodillas; pero al hacer una pausa, vio de repente, que el chico se había apoyado sobre sus manos con los pies en el aire, como un saltimbanqui, y que estaba recogiendo con sus labios un cuarto de penique brillante, que era uno de los tesoros favoritos de sus bolsillos. Mardoqueo podía haber considerado esto como una más de las burlas a las que estaba acostumbrado, pero en ese momento le produjo una horrible conmoción, como si hubiera sido una mueca satánica sobre su oración.

—¡Niño! ¡Niño! —gritó con un extraño chillido que sobresaltó a Jacob hasta la médula, y se dejó caer estremeciéndose y cerrando los ojos.

—¿Qué? —dijo Jacob rápidamente. Y al no tener una respuesta inmediata, presionó y sacudió las rodillas de Mardoqueo para levantarlo. Mardoqueo

abrió los ojos mostrando en ellos una expresión feroz, se inclinó hacia delante, agarró sus pequeños hombros, y dijo en un rápido y ronco susurro:

—Tu generación está maldita, chico. ¡Abrirán la montaña y sacarán a rastras las alas doradas para acuñarlas en monedas, y destrozarán los rostros solemnes para convertirlos en pendientes para mujeres libertinas! Y se impondrán a sí mismos un nombre nuevo, pero el ángel de la ignominia los marcará con un sello ardiente y los conocerá, y su corazón será la tumba de deseos muertos que se vuelquen hacia la podredumbre.

El aspecto y la acción de Mardoqueo eran tan nuevos y misteriosos para Jacob, llevaban consigo una carga tal de amenaza oscura —era como si el compañero paciente e indulgente se hubiera transformado en algo desconocido y terrible—: los ojos oscuros y hundidos, el acento ronco tan cerca de él, los escuálidos dedos que le agarraban, hicieron estremecer de horror al pequeño Jacob, y mientras Mardoqueo hablaba, él temblaba con la sensación de que la casa se venía abajo y que ya no iban a comer nunca más. Pero cuando acabó el terrible discurso y aflojó sus dedos, el sobresalto derivó en lágrimas; Jacob alzó su pequeño rostro patriarcal y se puso a llorar en voz alta. Este gesto de dolor infantil hizo que Mardoqueo retomara enseguida su comportamiento afable habitual: por el momento no fue capaz de hablar de nuevo, pero en una acción maternal, acercó la cabeza de cabellos rizados hacia él y la abrazó con ternura contra su pecho. Al hacer esto, viendo Jacob que el peligro ya había pasado por completo, comenzó a dar alaridos a su gusto, imitando su propia actuación y mejorándola —una especie de transición que se observa a menudo del impulso al arte—. De hecho, al día siguiente se propuso aterrorizar a Adelaida Rebeca, y lo consiguió del todo.

Pero Mardoqueo se reprimió una buena temporada, a causa de la conciencia de haber hecho un mal uso de su inquietud; era excitable pero cuerdo, y juzgaba severamente sus momentos de desvío como un anhelo fútil, y se sentía desacreditado consigo mismo. Cada vez más buscaba reconocer ese amigo que había de llegar, con el que compartiría tranquila y certeramente una amistad y un entendimiento.

Fue justo entonces cuando, en su guardia habitual de mediodía de la vieja librería, le sorprendió ver aparecer a Deronda, y tal vez se comprenda ahora por qué la mirada de Mardoqueo tomó un repentino y ansioso interés mientras miraba al recién llegado: vio un rostro y una figura que le parecían encajar perfectamente con el hombre que había concebido durante tanto tiempo. Pero la negación de su ascendencia judía fue por el momento un golpe doblemente

fuerte que representaba un paso atrás, y la decepción debilitó su confianza en una expectativa más indefinida. No obstante, cuando encontró a Deronda sentado a la mesa de los Cohen, la negación quedó por el momento anulada: retornó su primera impresión con fuerza añadida, pareciendo estar garantizada por este segundo encuentro bajo circunstancias más peculiares que la vez anterior; y al preguntarle a Deronda si sabía hebreo, Mardoqueo se hallaba tan poseído por la nueva embestida de la convicción, que había olvidado que faltaran más condiciones para la realización de sus esperanzas. Pero la respuesta «No» le hizo venirse abajo de nuevo, y la frustración fue más dolorosa que antes. Tras dar la espalda al visitante esa noche del Sabbath, Mardoqueo pasó varios días con un profundo desánimo, como el de los hombres de un barco a la deriva, que habiendo forzado sus ojos tras navegar, y mirar con gozo hacia delante, se dan cuenta que no avanzan y dicen: «Son nuestros ojos cansados los que crean la impresión». Pero la imagen que había contemplado tantas veces provenía de una secuencia emocional de las convicciones teóricas más firmes de Mardoqueo; había sido forjada desde la imaginación de su vida más pasional; e inevitablemente reaparecía —reaparecía autoafirmándose más que nunca—. Deronda tenía esa especie de semejanza con el tipo preconcebido como la que tiene un busto o un retrato hermoso con la idea más generalizada que nos queda en nuestra mente al cabo de un tiempo: disfrutamos renovando nuestro recuerdo, pero apenas sabemos cuánto se acerca a la realidad. Y ahora, su rostro se encontró con la mirada interior de Mardoqueo como si siempre hubiera pertenecido al amigo esperado, irradiando, además, parte de ese influjo que pertenece solo a los vivos; poco a poco parecía que el desánimo dejaba lugar a una nueva obstinación de resistencia, y la continua visión era tan fuerte que pedía a gritos obviar la evidencia, y mantener viva la esperanza. Era a Deronda a quien veía ahora en las noches de vigilia a menudo dolorosas —esas noches en que todos somos susceptibles de que se apodere de nosotros un único pensamiento—, y su figura, nunca de espaldas, la veía en los momentos de calma, cuando estaba a punto de dormirse o incluso recién dormido, pintado sobre ese cielo dorado que era el símbolo doblemente bendecido de la llegada del día y del esperado descanso.

Mardoqueo sabía que el extraño sin nombre iba a volver para redimir su anillo; y a pesar de las posibilidades que había en contra, el deseo de volver a verlo iba tomando la forma de la seguridad que volvería a verlo. En las semanas de enero, sintió una creciente inquietud, de esas que permanecen

ocultas y refrenan e impiden a la gente nerviosa ocuparse en nada ante la inminencia de un cambio anticipado. No pudo seguir dejando impreso en el pequeño Jacob sus poemas hebreos; ni acudiendo a su club semanal, otro de sus esfuerzos por la esperanza frustrada: había llegado algo diferente. Lo único que anhelaba era ir al río, cosa que no podía hacer sino raras veces y con dificultad. Ansiaba con la añoranza de un poeta por el ancho cielo, la vista lejana de los puentes, las luces suaves y oscilantes sobre el agua que parece respirar con una vida que tanto puede estremecerse y lamentarse como sentirse reconfortada y animada.

Capítulo 39

> Vor den Wissenden sich stellen
> Sicher ist’s in allen Fällen!
> Wenn du lange dich gequälet
> Weiss er gleich wo dir es fehlet;
> Auch auf Beifall darst du hoffen,
> Denn er weiss wo du’s getroffen.
>
> GOETHE, *West-östlicher Divan*[201]

SUCESOS TRASCENDENTALES LE OCURRIERON A DERONDA LA MISMA NOCHE DE SU visita a la pequeña casa de Chelsea, cuando se produjo la discusión sobre el nombre público de Mirah. Pero para el grupo familiar que quedó allí, los principales eventos conectados con ello ocurrieron dos días después. Hacia las cuatro las ruedas de un carruaje se detuvieron ante la puerta, y se oyó uno de esos golpeos acompañados del timbre que sirven para magnificar el sentido de la existencia social en una región en la que las señales más animadas provienen del hombre que trae las magdalenas. Todas las chicas estaban en casa, y se habían apartado las cosas de las dos habitaciones para hacer espacio para las pinturas de Kate, así como para una gran cantidad de bordados que ocupaban el espacio de los cojines lisos —una especie de obra maestra de los trabajos de aguja, realizados por algunos dedos habilidosos que habían estado disponibles—. Ocupaban la sala pintorescamente, la señora Meyrick ocupada en esas labores en una de las esquinas, Mab en medio y Amy en la otra punta. Mirah, cuyas realizaciones en la costura estaban todavía en el nivel del sastrecillo común[202], pues se había descuidado mucho su educación en esa rama, actuaba como lectora del grupo, sentada en un taburete; en esa posición servía también a Kate como modelo para la miniatura del título de una página, que simbolizaba a un público decente absorto en la lectura alrededor de la mesa del té. Estaba leyendo en voz alta con gran claridad uno de los preciosos Ensayos de Elia: *Elogio a los deshollinadores*[203], y todas sonreían ante la «negra inocencia», cuando el imponente golpe y el timbre elevaron sus pensamientos a esferas más altas, mirándose con sorpresa.

—¡Válgame Dios! —dijo la señora Meyrick—; ¿puede que sea Lady Mallinger? ¿Hay algún carruaje grande, Amy?

—No… solo un hermoso carro. Debe ser un caballero.

—El primer ministro, diría yo —dijo Kate, con sequedad—. Hans dice que el hombre más grande Londres debe ir en un hermoso carro.

—¡Oh, oh, oh! —gritó Mab—. Imaginaos que fuera Lord Rusell[204].

Los cinco rostros radiantes estaban mirándose unos a otros divertidos cuando la vieja sirvienta que llevaba distraídamente una carta, dejó la puerta del recibidor abierta, y quedó a la vista una figura que se inclinó hacia la señora Meyrick y que no se parecía en nada a la del respetado primer ministro —alto y físicamente impresionante incluso con su vestido de tela suave de algodón, de rostro macizo, pelo flameante y anteojos dorados—: era, de hecho, como vio la señora Meyrick por la tarjeta, *Julius Klesmer*.

Lo embarazoso de la escena no afectó apenas a la «madrecita», sino que enseguida se dio cuenta de la situación, y estaba satisfecha que el gran personaje hubiera venido a ver a Mirah y no que le pidiera que ella fuera a verle a él, tomándolo como un signo de interés verdadero. Pero cuando entró, las salas se empequeñecieron como si no fueran más que escaparates, el piano rústico, pensó Mab, parecía un juguete ridículo y todo el grupo familiar tan insignificante y poca cosa como una cuadrilla de ratones en las Tullerías[205]. La personalidad de Klesmer, especialmente su modo de mirar a su alrededor, inmediatamente sugería grandes espacios y una audiencia multitudinaria, y probablemente estos constituían el escenario habitual de su conciencia, pues todos nosotros solemos llevar nuestros pensamientos a algún *lugar* habitual donde se encuentran otras almas, y aquellos que ocupan un lugar más amplio que sus vecinos aparecen más presumidos y pretenciosos. Klesmer era vanidoso, pero no más que muchos contemporáneos de aspecto imponente, cuya vanidad salta a la vista y le asusta a uno como un bastón usado como lanza; en cuanto a su carruaje y sus gestos, eran tan naturales para él como la longitud de sus dedos; y si hubiera mostrado una afectación exuberante habría sido para parecer modesto y recatado. Mientras su aire grandioso le estaba haciendo sentir a Mab un juguete ridículo en consonancia con el piano rústico, él se fijaba en todos los detalles de su alrededor con una aguda y profundamente delicada sensibilidad. Recordaba una casa no mayor que esta en los alrededores de Bohemia; y en la emblemática Bohemia había entrado en contacto también con la variedad y el romance propios de quienes tienen pocos ingresos. Se dirigió a la señora Meyrick con el máximo respeto.

—Espero no haberme tomado una gran libertad. Al estar en el vecindario, me aventuré a ganar tiempo y llamar. Nuestro amigo el señor Deronda me

mencionó que podía tener el honor de conocer a una joven dama aquí presente: la señorita Lapidoth.

Klesmer había distinguido realmente a Mirah desde el primer momento al entrar, pero con sutil cortesía miró hacia las tres hermanas inclinando la cabeza como si no estuviera seguro de quién era la dama en cuestión.

—Esas son mis hijas: esta es la señorita Lapidoth —dijo la señora Meyrick señalando a Mirah.

—Ah —dijo Klesmer, mostrando que sus expectativas quedaban satisfechas, y dirigiendo una sonrisa radiante y una profunda inclinación hacia Mirah, que, en vez de mostrarse sorprendida, se hallaba tranquila y satisfecha. Le gustó la mirada de Klesmer, y estaba segura que la reprendería como un gran músico y un hombre amable.

—No se opondrá usted a que empecemos nuestra amistad permitiéndome oírla cantar —añadió, consciente de que todos agradecerían librarse de los preámbulos.

—Me encantaría. Es muy amable al querer escucharme —dijo Mirah, dirigiéndose hacia el piano—. ¿Me acompaño yo misma?

—Por supuesto —dijo Klesmer, aceptando la invitación de la señora Meyrick y sentándose donde podría tener una buena visión de la cantante. La pequeña y astuta madre no habría reconocido la debilidad, pero en realidad se dijo: «Le gustará más su canto si la ve».

Todos los corazones femeninos excepto el de Mirah latían con fuerza y ansiedad, asustadas por el tremendo Klesmer al verlo sentado escuchando con el ceño fruncido, al que solo se atrevían a mirar furtivamente. Si dijera algo severo sería un duro golpe para todas ellas. Solo podrían consolarse pensado que el Príncipe Camaralzamán, que había oído las cosas más finas, prefería el canto de Mirah a cualquier otro: pero ella parecía estarlo haciendo mejor que nunca, como si estuviera más tranquila de lo habitual en vez de más nerviosa.

La canción que había escogido era un bello transfondo a base de algunas de las palabras de la gran Oda a Italia de Leopardi[206]:

> Oh, patria mia, vedo le mura e gli archi
> e le colonne e i simulacri e l’erme
> torri degli avi nostri…

Esto fue en recitativo; luego continuó:

> Ma la gloria non vedo…

una melodía lastimosa, una queja rítmica. Tras esto llegó un clímax de triunfo devoto, pasando de una adoración contenida mediante un Andante feliz con las palabras:

> Beatissimi voi,
> che offriste il petto alle nemiche lance
> per amor di costei che al sol vi diede…

a un estallido gozoso mediante un Allegro exultante:

> Oh viva, viva:
> Beatissimi voi
> Mentre nel mondo si favelli o scriva

Cuando acabó, Klesmer dijo tras unos momentos:

—Eso es la música del viejo Leo.

—Sí, fue mi último maestro, en Viena: tan airado y tan bueno —dijo Mirah con una sonrisa melancólica—. Profetizó que mi voz no serviría para el escenario. Y tenía razón.

—Continúe, si es tan amable —dijo Klesmer, sacando los labios y agitando sus largos dedos, a la vez que decía algo más de forma sofocada y casi ininteligible para la audiencia.

Las tres chicas le detestaron vivamente por no decir ni una sola palabra de alabanza. La señora Meyrick estaba algo alarmada.

Mirah se dispuso a hacer lo que Klesmer deseaba, y suponiendo que a él le gustaría oír algo ahora en alemán, continuó con la música del Príncipe Radzivill[207], concretamente las canciones de Gretchen, una tras otra, sin pausa entre ellas. Cuando terminó, él se levantó y caminó dentro del poco espacio disponible, luego volvió al sitio del piano, donde estaba Mirah, que se había ya levantado y le miraba con sus pequeñas manos cruzadas ante ella, esperando el juicio humildemente; entonces, enarcando bruscamente las cejas y con ojos brillantes, le tendió la mano y dijo bruscamente:

—Estrechemos nuestras manos: es usted una música.

Mab sintió que se le escapaban las lágrimas, y las tres chicas creyeron que Klesmer era adorable. La señora Meyrick dio un respiro de alivio.

Pero inmediatamente volvió a fruncir el ceño, y al estrechar su larga mano, alargó su dedo índice para tocar su muñeca y decirle con la boca en posición redondeada:

—No para grandes tareas. No para estar en la cima. No somos pájaros que vuelan alto. Debemos ser modestos. —Klesmer hizo una pausa. Y Mab dejó

de considerarlo adorable: «¡Como si Mirah hubiera mostrado el más mínimo signo de vanidad!».

Mirah permaneció en silencio, sabiendo que debía esperar una opinión específica, y Klesmer prosiguió:

—No le aconsejaría, de hecho, no promovería su canto en un espacio más amplio que una sala de estar. Pero triunfará en este tipo de salas. Y aquí en Londres tiene la oportunidad de hacer una de las mejores carreras. Tendrá que tomar lecciones. ¿Vendrá y cantará en un concierto privado en mi casa el miércoles?

—Oh, estaré muy agradecida —dijo Mirah, juntando sus manos devotamente—. Prefiero ganarme el pan de esa manera que de una forma más pública. Intentaré mejorar. ¿Qué es lo que más debo trabajar?

Klesmer dio una respuesta preliminar en forma de ruidos que sonaban como palabras rotas y tragadas antes de ser emitidas, mientras se estiraba los dedos, antes de decir, bien claramente:

—Le presentaré a Astorga: es el padre adoptivo de los buenos cantantes y le dará a usted consejo. —Luego, dirigiéndose a la señora Meyrick, añadió—: La señora Klesmer llamará antes del miércoles, con su permiso.

—Será muy amable por su parte —dijo la señora Meyrick.

—Cantará para ella —dijo Klesmer, dirigiéndose de nuevo a Mirah—. Es una música completa, y su alma tiene más oído para la música que lo que es habitual encontrar en otros músicos. Su canto la satisfará:

Vor denWissenden sich stellen

¿conoce usted el resto?

Sicher ist’s in allen Fällen[208],

—dijo Mirah prontamente. Y diciendo Klesmer: —«¡Schön!»[209] saludó con la mano para despedirse.

Ciertamente había escogido la forma más delicada de alabar a Mirah, y las chicas Meyrick lo querían completamente. Pero imaginad lo que sintió Mab cuando, de repente, fijando Klesmer sus ojos en ella, dijo con determinación:

—Esa joven señorita tiene sentido musical, lo veo. —Se sonrojó toda ella por entero con una sensación de abrasarse.

—Sí —dijo Mirah en su nombre—. Y toca de una forma especial.

—Oh, por favor, Mirah, querrás decir de una forma caótica —dijo Mab, toda angustiada, con un temor horrible a lo que podía ser el siguiente paso:

este espantoso personaje divino (sin duda, Satanás vestido con pantalones grises) podría mandarle sentarse al piano, y notaba que su corazón se derretía como cera en su interior. Pero no fue más que un precio barato que tuvo que pagar por la sorprendente alegría que le proporcionaron las benignas palabras que Klesmer dirigió a la señora Meyrick—: ¿Cree que le gustará acompañar a la señorita Lapidoth y oír también la música el miércoles?

—Sería difícil encontrar algo que le agradara más —dijo la señora Meyrick—. Estará muy satisfecha y agradecida.

Acto seguido Klesmer se inclinó hacia las tres hermanas como nunca nadie se había inclinado ante ellas. En conjunto, era una escena graciosa: la pequeña sala con parte de su diagonal ocupada con la espléndida inclinación de Klesmer hacia las pequeñas figuras femeninas como imágenes un poco más pequeñas que las del tamaño natural, los rostros serios de los Holbein colgados en las paredes, ocupando casi todo el espacio, mirando duramente a este extraño que por su semblante pasaba por un digno contemporáneo suyo, pero cuyas vestimentas parecían una burla deplorable de la forma humana.

La señora Meyrick no pudo evitar salir de la habitación con Klesmer y cerrar la puerta tras ella. Él la comprendió y dijo asintiendo con el ceño fruncido:

—Lo logrará: si no hace demasiados esfuerzos y su voz resiste, puede conseguir unos ingresos. Sé que este es el punto importante: Deronda me lo contó. Están ustedes cuidando de ella. Parece una buena chica.

—Es un ángel —dijo la mujer de buen corazón.

—No —dijo Klesmer, ladeando graciosamente la cabeza—; es una hermosa judía: no hay que atribuir el mérito a los ángeles. Pero creo que ella ha encontrado a un ángel de la guarda —concluyó, inclinándose de forma amistosa.

Las cuatro jóvenes criaturas estuvieron mirándose unas a otras en silencio hasta que se oyó el ruido de la puerta de la calle y volvió la señora Meyrick. Entonces se desató la explosión. Mab empezó a aplaudir y se puso a bailar de la forma más inconveniente; la señora Meyrick besó a Mirah y la bendijo; Amy dijo enfáticamente:

—¡No podremos conseguirle un vestido nuevo para antes del miércoles! —Y Kate exclamó— ¡Gracias a Dios que mi mesa no ha ido a parar al suelo!

Mirah se había sentado de nuevo en el taburete del piano sin decir nada, y rodaban lágrimas por sus mejillas mientras miraba a sus amigas.

—¡Venga, venga, Mab! —dijo la señora Meyrick—; compórtate razonablemente, ven y siéntate, que hablaremos.

—Sí, hablemos —dijo Mab, cariñosamente, regresando a su sitio y acariciándose las rodillas—. Ahora podemos hablar sin tapujos. Hans dijo que vendría esta tarde. Ojalá hubiera estado aquí, solo que no habría habido espacio para él. Mirah, ¿por qué pareces tan triste?

—Estoy muy feliz —dijo Mirah—. Siento mucha gratitud hacia todas vosotras; y también él ha sido muy amable.

—Sí, al final sí —dijo Mab, con crudeza—. Pero podía haber dicho algo más alentador antes. Pensé de él que era espantosamente feo cuando estaba sentado frunciendo el ceño y solo dijo: «Continúe». Lo odié desde la punta de sus cabellos a la de sus pulcras botas.

—Tonterías, Mab; tiene un perfil espléndido —dijo Kate.

—*Ahora*, pero no *entonces*. No soporto a la gente que mantiene a los demás en vilo para descubrir sus intenciones al final. Parece que tengan envidia de la felicidad que te van a proporcionar y tienen que hacerte sufrir antes. No obstante, se lo perdono todo —dijo Mab, con aire magnánimo—, ya que me ha invitado. Me pregunto por qué me señaló como la que tenía talento musical. ¿Será porque tengo una frente saltona, mami, y el talento asoma por ella como la cabeza de un tritón bajo una piedra?

—Fue por tu forma de escuchar el canto, niña —dijo la señora Meyrick—. Tiene unos anteojos mágicos y lo ve todo a través de ellos. Pero ¿qué era esa cita alemana que enseguida completaste, Mirah?, ¿aprendiste el dialecto?

—Oh, no tuve que aprenderlo —dijo Mirah, secándose las lágrimas y ofreciendo una sonrisa divertida—. La repetí muchas veces en una lección. Significa que lo más seguro es hacer cualquier cosa (cantar o lo que sea) ante los que lo saben todo sobre eso.

—Por eso no estabas nada asustada, supongo —dijo Amy—. Pero, en fin, ahora tenemos que hablar de un vestido para ti para el miércoles.

—No quiero nada mejor que este negro merino —dijo Mirah, levantándose para mostrar su efecto—. Unos guantes blancos y unos botines nuevos.

Y sacó su pequeño piececito de una de sus zapatillas de fieltro.

—Ahí viene Hans —dijo la señora Meyrick—. Quedaos aquí y oigamos lo que nos dice de este vestido. Los artistas son las mejores personas a quines consultar estas cosas.

—Pues a mí no me consultas, mami —dijo Kate, arqueando las cejas en un tono de queja travieso—. Me estoy dando cuenta de que las madres son como las personas que trato: lo que hacen las chicas no se valora.

—Mi querida niña, los chicos son un problema tan grande… no podríamos soportarlos si no les hiciéramos creer que valen más —dijo la señora Meyrick justo en el momento en que entraba su chico—. Hans, queremos tu opinión sobre el vestido de Mirah. Ha ocurrido un gran suceso. Klesmer ha estado aquí y ella va a cantar a su casa el miércoles entre personas muy importantes. Ella cree que con este vestido será suficiente.

—Déjeme ver —dijo Hans. Mirah se volvió hacia él en su forma infantil para que la mirara; y él, alejándose un poco, se agachó poniendo una rodilla sobre un almohadón para observarla mejor.

—La gente creerá que es un vestido para actuar muy apropiado para mí —dijo en tono de súplica—, pues es una pobre judía la que viene a cantar a cristianos respetables.

—Sería muy efectivo —dijo Hans, pensativo—; destacaría muy bien entre el resto de los vestidos respetables.

—Pero no deberías pensar que toda la pobreza está en tu campo, Mirah —dijo Amy—. Hay muchísimos cristianos pobres, y judíos horrorosamente ricos y judías muy respetables.

—No quería herir a nadie —dijo Mirah—. Solo que estoy acostumbrada a pensar sobre el vestido que habría de llevar en mis actuaciones. Y siempre lo he hecho con un vestido simple.

—Eso me hace dudar —dijo Hans, que de repente se había vuelto tan quisquilloso y ceremonioso en esta ocasión como él pensaba que lo fue Deronda en relación con las pinturas de Berenice—. Parece un poco demasiado teatral. No debemos ponerle en el papel de la pobre judía, o incluso de ser judía. —Hans tenía el deseo secreto de neutralizar su judaísmo en la vida privada, cosa que peligraba no mantener en secreto.

—Pero es precisamente lo que soy. No pretendo fingir nada. Nunca seré nada más —dijo Mirah—. Siempre me sentiré judía.

—Pero nosotros no podemos sentir eso sobre usted —dijo Hans, mirándola devotamente—. ¿Qué significa si una mujer perfecta es judía o no?

—Esa es una forma muy amable de elogiarme; nunca nadie me había elogiado así antes —dijo Mirah, con una sonrisa que casi vuelve loco a Hans y le hizo sentir más cosmopolita.

—La gente no piensa en mí como un cristiano británico —dijo, con su rostro cada vez más exultante—. Piensan en mí como un joven no muy apuesto y un pintor poco prometedor.

—Pero os estáis yendo por las ramas, y hablábamos del vestido —dijo Amy—. Si este no sirve, ¿cómo vamos a conseguir otro antes del miércoles? ¡Y mañana es domingo!

—De verdad que este servirá —imploró Mirah—. Esto es real, ya sabe —dijo mirando a Hans—, incluso si parece teatral. La pobre Berenice sentada en las ruinas… eso sí que era teatral, aunque era tal como debía ser.

—Soy un canalla —dijo Hans, conmovido por su confianza ciega—. Eso fue invención mía. Nadie sabe si realmente hizo eso. ¿Me perdonará por no habérselo dicho antes?

—Oh, sí —dijo Mirah, tras una pausa momentánea producida por la sorpresa—. Usted sabía lo que ella tenía que hacer: era una judía que no había sido fiel, y que estaba arrepentida por lo que había hecho. No podía alegrarse de nada sino afligirse: ¿y a qué otro sitio podía dirigirse? Creo que fue muy hermoso que usted se metiera en la piel de lo que debía sentir una judía.

—Las judías de ese tiempo se sentaban en las ruinas —dijo Hans, levantándose con la sensación de que le habían dejado muerto—. Eso resulta conveniente para los cuadros.

—Pero el vestido… el vestido —dijo Amy—; ¿ya lo habéis decidido?

—Sí, ¿no? —dijo Mirah, mirando dubitativamente a la señora Meyrick, quien a su vez, miró a su hijo, y dijo—: ¿Qué crees, Hans?

—Ese vestido no es el adecuado —dijo Hans con determinación—. Ella no va a ir a sentarse sobre unas ruinas. Tienes que subir con ella a un coche, mamaíta, e ir a Regent Street. Tenéis tiempo de sobra para escoger lo que queráis, un vestido de seda negro como el que llevan las damas. No la deben tomar por un objeto de caridad. Tiene talentos para merecer que sea la gente la que quede en deuda con ella.

—Creo que es lo que al señor Deronda le habría gustado, que tuviera un vestido precioso —dijo la señora Meyrick reflexivamente.

—Por supuesto —dijo Hans, algo cortante—. Podéis considerar mi palabra como lo que pensaría un caballero.

—Me gustaría hacer lo que el señor Deronda quisiera que hiciera —dijo Mirah, seriamente, viendo que la señora Meyrick la observaba; y Hans, dándose la vuelta, fue hacia la mesa de Kate y cogió una de sus pinturas, como si necesitara interesarse por otras cosas.

—¿No te gustaría hacer un estudio del busto de Klesmer, Hans? —dijo Kate—. Supongo que lo has visto a menudo.

—¡Que si lo he visto! —exclamó Hans, echando hacia atrás su cabeza y sus cabellos, sentándose en el piano y mirando a su alrededor como si estuviera inspeccionando un anfiteatro, mientras colocaba sus dedos perpendicularmente a las teclas. Pero entonces, rodando sobre el taburete se giró de nuevo hacia Mirah y dijo, un poco tímidamente—: Tal vez a usted no le gusten estas bromas mímicas. Debe poner fin a mis tonterías siempre que le desagraden.

Mirah había estado sonriendo ante la rápida imagen formada por Hans, y todavía sonreía, pero con algo más además de diversión, cuando dijo:

—Gracias. Pero usted no ha hecho nunca nada que no me gustara. No creo que fuera capaz, siendo hijo de usted —añadió, mirando a la señora Meyrick.

De esta forma se alimentaron aún más las esperanzas de Hans. ¿Cómo podía evitarlo la rosa cuando varias abejas en sucesión olían su dulce aroma como signo de cariño personal?

Capítulo 40

> Hay en el alma una facultad que tolera
> las intercalaciones, que a primera vista esconden
> y oscurecen el futuro, pero que pueden
> resultar prometedoras;
> y sirve esta facultad para exaltar
> su brillo nativo, como el de la luna llena
> en la profunda quietud de una noche de verano,
> alzándose tras un bosque espeso y majestuoso.
> Arde, como un fuego incombustible,
> entre los árboles verdes, y prende por todas partes
> su sombra frondosa; convierte el velo oscuro
> en una sustancia tan gloriosa como ella misma.
> Sí, incorporadas a sí misma por el poder
> dilatado y sereno.
>
> WORDSWORTH, *Excursión*

DERONDA SALIÓ DE LA ESTRECHA CASA DE CHELSEA EN TAL ESTADO QUE PENSÓ QUE le convendría hacer un poco de ejercicio físico para disipar lo que él mismo reconocía como mal humor en su temperamento. Iba hacia la ciudad y la vista de las Escaleras de Chelsea con los botes amarrados le hizo decidirse en el acto por evitar la irritable inactividad de ser conducido por un carro, y llamó a una barquilla y cogió un remo.

Se dirigía hacia la librería Ram, a la que había llegado el día anterior demasiado tarde para el turno de guardia de mediodía de Mardoqueo, y se le había dicho que volviera otra vez entre las cinco y las seis. Deronda deseaba especialmente conocer más a fondo a este destacado inquilino de los Cohen como acción preliminar para redimir su anillo; esperaba que su conversación no volviera a acabarse tan rápido con el súbito desinterés de Mardoqueo, que era como cerrar un puente levadizo, cosa que dificultaría retomar cualquier comunicación en el futuro. Mientras se calentaba haciendo uso del remo, concentrándose en lo que tenía delante y en los fines que quería conseguir para el bien de Mirah, experimentó, como era habitual en él, un repentino cambio de pensamiento, descubriendo una luz al cambiar su punto de vista por el de la persona de la que había estado pensando principalmente hasta el momento como alguien muy útil para sus propósitos, y se recriminó no haber

sido mucho mejor que un sargento reclutador, que nunca se preocupa del drama que conlleva alistar a la gente.

—Supongo que si consiguiera de este hombre la información que ansío —pensaba Deronda—, ya estaría suficientemente satisfecho, aunque él no quisiera contarme más de sí mismo, o por qué parecía esperar algo de mí luego le decepcionó. La especie de curiosidad que me ha provocado moriría; y aún así podría ser que se haya acercado a mí y que luego se aleje, como podría pensarse de dos barcos, cada uno con un exiliado en su interior, que se habrían reconocido si se hubieran mirado cara a cara. No es que haya ninguna similitud o algún lazo peculiar entre este pobre individuo y yo, que además me imagino que no le quedará mucho de vida. Pero me pregunto si no se está produciendo una de esas trascendentales pérdidas mutuas entre dos personas que intercambian miradas en blanco, o que piensan la una en la ausencia de la otra estando rodeados de una multitud. Sin embargo, uno pierde sus oportunidades cuando sigue actuando como el sargento reclutador.

Cuando la barca se iba acercando al Puente de los Frailes Negros, donde Deronda pensaba tomar tierra, eran las cuatro y media, y el día gris iba muriendo gloriosamente, con las nubes del oeste separadas en estrechos estratos color púrpura ante una claridad de azafrán que se extendía a lo lejos, y que en el cielo poseía una calma colosal, pero en el río, a través del agua que corría, se reflejaba en un movimiento luminoso: la alternancia de las olas y las corrientes, el repentino fulgor de la vela oscura, las barcas cargadas pasando de la opacidad al colorido, conformaban una viva respuesta a esa gloria extática.

Sintiéndose ya bien caliente, Deronda dejó el remo y se puso su capa de Inverness[210]. Al levantar la cabeza mientras acababa de abrocharse el último botón, sus ojos dieron con un rostro conocido que le miraba desde el parapeto del puente; la luz del oeste lo destacaba con una claridad y un brillo sorprendente, iluminando un cuerpo demacrado y un espíritu anhelante. Era el rostro de Mardoqueo, quien a su vez, al mirar hacia el oeste, había visto avanzar el bote, y lo había seguido con la mirada, al principio solo porque avanzaba, luego recobrando ciertas impresiones que le hicieron estremecerse por un presentimiento, hasta que al fin la figura cercana alzó su rostro hacia él —el rostro de sus visiones— e inmediatamente levantando la mano le hizo señas para que se acercara.

Deronda, que quería que Mardoqueo le reconociera y le esperara, no perdió ni un instante en responder a la señal. Mardoqueo se sacó la gorra y la

ondeó —sintiendo en esos momentos que su profecía interior se había cumplido—. Todos los obstáculos e incongruencias se desvanecieron en la sensación de consumación en la que flotaba su alma por la satisfacción y confirmación de su anhelo. Su alegría no era muy diferente de la del científico experimental inclinándose sobre los primeros signos del cambio correspondientes a lo que su pensamiento, en el fervor de su previsión concentrada, había anticipado. El amigo anunciado con antelación venía del horizonte dorado y le había señalado: esto es lo que era; el resto tenía que suceder.

En tres minutos Deronda había tomado tierra, pagado al barquero, y se había unido a Mardoqueo, que instintivamente se había quedado en su sitio sin moverse y esperándole.

—Me alegra verle aquí —dijo Deronda—, pues pretendía ir a la librería y preguntar por usted de nuevo. Estuve ayer, tal vez se lo mencionaron.

—Sí —dijo Mardoqueo—, es por eso por lo que vine al puente.

La respuesta, formulada con seriedad, era sorprendentemente misteriosa para Deronda. ¿Las peculiaridades de este hombre estaban realmente asociadas a algún tipo de alienación mental, como sugería Cohen?

—¿Sabía usted que estaba en Chelsea? —dijo tras un momento.

—No; pero esperaba que bajara por el río. Le he estado esperando cinco años. —Mardoqueo tenía fijos sus ojos hundidos en los del amigo que por fin había llegado, con una mirada de dependencia entrañable, a la vez patética y solemne. La sensibilidad de Deronda no era menos receptiva puesto que no podía creer que esta relación descubierta de forma tan extraña se hubiera fundado en una ilusión.

—Será una satisfacción para mí si le puedo servir de algo —contestó con toda su sinceridad—. ¿Quiere que entremos en un carro y vayamos adonde usted quiera? Ha caminado seguramente ya bastante y le falta el aliento.

—Vayamos a la librería. Pronto será hora de que tenga que estar allí. Pero primero mire el río —dijo Mardoqueo, girándose hacia él y hablando en voz baja con lo que podría llamarse una calma excitada, tan absorto por la sensación de satisfacción que pensaba que no había ya barreras entre él y Deronda para comprenderse completamente—. Observe el cielo, cómo oscurece poco a poco. Siempre me ha gustado este puente: me pasaba horas aquí de pie cuando era niño. Es un lugar de encuentro para los mensajeros espirituales. Es verdad lo que dijeron los Profetas: que cada tipo de cosas tiene su ángel, que ayuda a discernir su pleno mensaje de lo que está alejado

de él. Aquí he escuchado los mensajes del cielo y de la tierra; cuando era más fuerte solía quedarme y observar las estrellas del firmamento. Pero estos momentos en los que se ponía el sol eran mis preferidos. Han penetrado en mí, los he hecho míos: la luz apagándose, apagándose poco a poco, era mi propio declive; y mientras todo quedaba en suspenso, esperando, llegó la nueva vida, mi nuevo yo, que vivirá cuando se apague este aliento.

Deronda no dijo nada. Se sentía extrañamente influido. La primera sospecha que sugería que Mardoqueo pudiera tener alucinaciones de pensamiento —que fuera un monomaníaco sobre algún tema que le hubiera provocado un esfuerzo excesivo a su débil organismo— dejó paso a una expectativa más sumisa. Su naturaleza era demasiado comprensiva, demasiado dispuesta a concebir otras experiencias más allá de las suyas como para conformarse con la simple explicación de la locura siempre que encontraba una conciencia que mostrara una plenitud y una convicción sobre algo de lo que él carecía. Por su disposición habitual era normal que acogiera más que se resistiera a cualquier demanda que se presentara en la forma de necesidad del prójimo; y esta demanda llevaba consigo un sentido de solemnidad que parecía una radiación de Mardoqueo, como si anulara su pobreza exterior y le otorgara una nueva autoridad, como si hubiera sido el guía preternatural de la leyenda universal, que de repente se despoja de su perverso disfraz y deja al manifiesto su poder. Confirmaba esa impresión una especie de aplomo resuelto que la idea de haber visto realizados sus propósitos había producido en las maneras de Mardoqueo. Después de permanecer ambos unos momentos en silencio, dijo:

—Vámonos ya —y cuando iban caminando añadió—: Bajaremos hasta el final de la calle y llegaremos a la librería. Usted puede mirar los libros, y el señor Ram se marchará y nos dejará solos.

Parecía que este entusiasta era tan cauto y tan preocupado por lo que pensaran los demás como si hubiera sido lo contrario a todo tipo de entusiasmo, como «un hombre del mundo».

Durante el traqueteo en el carruaje, Mirah estaba aún presente en la mente de Deronda en medio de esta extraña experiencia, pero esperaba que el curso de la conversación lo decidiera Mardoqueo, no él: ya no se sentía seguro sobre qué preguntas debía preguntar; y un poco a su pesar, se dijo: «Supongo que estoy en un estado de completa superstición, como si estuviera esperando el sino que interpretara el oráculo. Pero tiene que haber una fuerte relación entre este hombre y yo, puesto que él la siente fuertemente. ¡Santo cielo!

¿Qué relación hay en el mundo más potente que la fe, incluso aunque no sea cierta, que las expectativas, aunque constantemente se vean defraudadas? ¿Me corresponde a mí defraudar o satisfacer? Bien, siempre que sea posible satisfacer, no defraudaré».

En diez minutos, los dos hombres, tan conscientes de su situación como si hubieran sido dos amantes sin haberse declarado, se dieron cuenta que estaban solos en la pequeña librería iluminada con gas y quedaron enfrentados cara a cara, dejando cada uno al descubierto su cabeza, por el presentimiento mutuo de que ambos querían verse completamente. Mardoqueo se adelantó para apoyar su espalda contra el mostrador, mientras que Deronda se apoyó en la pared opuesta apenas a cuatro pies de distancia. ¡Cómo podré inmortalizar esos dos rostros de la misma forma que el Tributo de la Moneda de Tiziano[211] inmortalizó otros dos rostros con otro tipo de contraste! Imaginad —todos podemos hacerlo— la marca patética de la extenuación con su mirada brillante y esos rasgos bruscos que recuerdan a un templo abandonado, y que muestran la desesperación de quien se halla en un lugar inasequible; e imaginad esa marca sobre el rostro de un judío, acentuada de forma natural por la expresión de un alma fervorosa, el rostro de un hombre de poco más de treinta años, pero para el cual ese tiempo había sido alargado por el sufrimiento, con el pelo y la barba todavía negra disimulando la demacrada palidez de su piel, respirando con dificultad, lo que resaltaba aún más el movimiento de las ventanillas de su nariz, y con manos desgastadas sobresaliendo de sus brazos cruzados; luego, dad a la mirada anhelante y tísica algo de la mirada de esa madre moribunda que cuando su hijo amado visita su cama, hace saltar el trémulo poder de la alegría y dice: «¡Hijo mío!», pues la sensación de perpetuación espiritual en otro se asemeja a la transferencia maternal.

Viendo ese retrato veríais a Mardoqueo. Y enfrente de él había un rostro no muy distinto de los que encontramos entre la raza latina: llena de salud juvenil, y con una contundente gravedad masculina, que recibió con una reverencia respetuosa la mirada de este misterioso hijo de la pobreza que le reclamaba como su amigo largamente esperado. La cualidad más exquisita del carácter de Deronda —esa emotividad profundamente compasiva que iba a la par con su tendencia especulativa— no había sido nunca tan puesta a prueba como entonces. No es que creyera de verdad en la validez de las impresiones de Mardoqueo respecto a él o en la probabilidad de un gran desenlace fructífero: lo que sentía era una profunda sensibilidad a un grito que clamaba

desde la profundidad de otra alma; y además, se sentía llamado a ser receptivo en vez de mostrar prejuicios altivos. La receptividad es una capacidad inusual pero sólida, como la entereza; y este estado de ánimo otorgó al semblante de Deronda su expresión máxima de contundencia benigna y sosegada, una expresión que alimentó la confianza de Mardoqueo y le hizo abrirse camino ante él. Empezó a decir:

—No puede saber lo que me ha guiado hasta usted y nos ha reunido en este momento. Se lo estará preguntando.

—No estoy impaciente —dijo Deronda—. Estoy dispuesto a escuchar lo que quiera revelarme.

—Ya ve alguna de las razones por las que le necesitaba —dijo Mardoqueo, hablando tranquilamente, como si quisiera reservarse fuerzas—. Se da cuenta de que me estoy muriendo. Ya ve que soy como uno que está entre rejas, y que si intentara hablar con alguien, solo se me miraría con compasión sacudiendo la cabeza. El día se acaba, cada vez hay menos luz, dentro de poco no podremos vernos bien. Pero ha venido a tiempo.

—Me alegro de haber venido a tiempo —dijo Deronda, con gran sentimiento. No se atrevió a decir: «Espero que no se haya equivocado conmigo». La misma palabra «equivocado», pensó, le parecía una crueldad en esos momentos.

—Pero las razones más recónditas por las que le necesito comenzaron hace mucho tiempo —dijo Mardoqueo—; comenzaron en mis primeros años cuando estudiaba en otra tierra. Allí se me ocurrieron ideas, ideas hermosas, pues yo era un judío. Era una satisfacción confiar en ellas, pues yo era un judío. Eran una inspiración, pues yo era un judío, y sentía el sentimiento de mi raza latiendo en mí. Eran mi vida; no nací del todo hasta entonces. Consideré a mi corazón, y mi pecho, y esta mano derecha —Mardoqueo se había presionado la mano patéticamente contra el pecho, y luego estiró sus dedos gastados ante él— consideré que mi descanso y mis pasos, y el trabajo con el que alimentaba mi cuerpo, y las vistas con que alimentaba mis ojos, los consideré como el combustible de la llama divina. Pero yo había hecho como el que deambula y estampa sus pensamientos en soledades rocosas, y antes de que pudiera cambiar este rumbo llegaron las preocupaciones, el trabajo y la enfermedad, y me bloquearon el camino, y me ataron con las cadenas que inmovilizan el alma. Entonces me dije: «¿Cómo podré salvar mi vida de ser ahogada con este aire sofocante?».

Mardoqueo hizo una pausa para descansar y tomar aire por el cansancio provocado por la excitación creciente de su discurso. Y quiso también refrenar esa excitación. Deronda no se atrevía a hablar: el mismo silencio en el estrecho espacio parecía lleno de estupor y compasión ante este fervor combativo. Y finalmente Mardoqueo prosiguió:

—Pero puede que me malinterprete. No hablo como un soñador ignorante, como alguien que ha crecido en los valles del interior, que tiene pensamientos ancestrales y los cree nuevos sin saber que son antiguos, y que nunca ha pasado por las aguas donde circula el conocimiento del mundo. El inglés es mi lengua materna, Inglaterra es el país nativo de este cuerpo, que no es más que una maceta rota con tierra alrededor del árbol frutal, cuya semilla puede repoblar el desierto. Pero mi verdadera vida transcurrió en Holanda, a los pies del hermano de mi madre, un Rabino especializado, y cuando murió fui a Hamburgo a estudiar, y después a Gotinga, para poder tener una mayor perspectiva de mi gente y del mundo gentil, y beber del conocimiento de todas las fuentes. Yo era joven: me sentía libre; teníamos los puestos principales en Alemania; no estaba entonces en la pobreza. Había llegado a hacerme cargo de una tienda de artesanía. Pues me dije: no me importa que mi suerte sea la de Joshua ben Chananja[212]: tras la última destrucción se ganaba el pan trabajando con la aguja, pero en su juventud había sido cantante en las escaleras del Templo, y tenía un buen recuerdo de lo que era antes de que se esfumara la gloria. Y me dije: que mi cuerpo permanezca en la pobreza y que mis manos sean las del trabajador; pero que mi alma sea el templo del recuerdo donde aniden los tesoros de la sabiduría y que su santuario sea la esperanza. Sabía lo que escogía. Me decían: «Se alimenta de visiones», y yo no lo negaba, pues las visiones crean y alimentan el mundo. Yo veo, tomo el mundo por lo que es, y en lo que lo transformará la visión. Pero nadie escucha a quien cree que desvaría y se mantiene apartado de la vida de sus compañeros.

Mardoqueo hizo una pausa, y Deronda, pensando que era para esperar una respuesta, dijo:

—Hónreme y crea que yo no pienso que sus palabras desvaríen. Escucho para poder saber, sin prejuicios. He tenido la suficiente experiencia como para interesarme profundamente por la historia de un destino espiritual acogido de corazón, y abrazado desde la juventud.

—¿Un destino espiritual acogido de corazón… en la juventud? —repitió Mardoqueo en tono de corrección—. Es el espíritu que me inundó por entero,

y me vino en la infancia. Trajo consigo su propio mundo, un mundo medieval, poblado de hombres que resucitaban las lenguas antiguas proclamando nuevos salmos de exilio. Habían absorbido la filosofía del gentil en la fe del judío, y todavía añoraban una tierra para nuestra raza. Parte de su espíritu renació en mí, y despertó entre los recuerdos de su mundo. Viajó por España y Provenza; debatió con Aben-Esdras[213]; viajó en barco con Yehudá Haleví[214]; oyó el rugido de los Cruzados y el alarido del Israel torturado. Y cuando su lengua muda se desató, habló en la lengua que resucitó la nueva sangre de su ardor, su dolor y su confianza martirizada: cantó con el ritmo de su esfuerzo.

Mardoqueo hizo una nueva pausa, y luego dijo en un susurro alto y ronco:

—Mientras esté prisionero en mí, no aprenderá nada más.

—¿Ha escrito usted en hebreo, entonces? —dijo Deronda, recordando con ansiedad su anterior pregunta sobre el conocimiento de esa lengua.

—Sí… sí —dijo Mardoqueo en un tono de profunda tristeza—; en mi juventud caminé hacia esa soledad, sin saber que era soledad. Los grandes muertos me honraban; los mártires se reunían alrededor mío y me escuchaban. Pero pronto me di cuenta de que los vivos no me prestaban atención. Al principio vi mi vida extendida ante un largo futuro: dije que parte de mi herencia judía es paciencia inquebrantable; una parte consiste en la habilidad de buscar lugares en los que arraigarse allí donde otros no los han encontrado. Pero vinieron nuevos mensajeros del Eterno. Tuve que inclinarme ante el yugo que presiona a la gran multitud de los nacidos de mujer: tuve que hacer frente a problemas familiares… tuve que trabajar y preocuparme no solo de mí mismo. Fui abandonado de nuevo, pero el ángel de la muerte ya se había vuelto hacia mí y me llamaba por señas, y sentía cómo me pisaba los talones.

»No dejé de esforzarme. Supliqué ayuda. Hablé; fui a ver a hombres de nuestro pueblo, a los ricos en influencia o sabiduría, y a los que poseían otras riquezas. Pero nadie me escuchaba con comprensión. Fui reprochado y me dijeron que estaba equivocado; me ofrecieron una pequeña cantidad de dinero por caridad. No era de extrañar. Parecía pobre; llevaba un fajo de manuscritos hebreos conmigo; dije que nuestros principales maestros nos están quitando la esperanza de nuestra raza. El erudito y el comerciante estaban ambos demasiado ocupados para escuchar. El desprecio era el intérprete entre ellos y yo. Uno dijo: “El libro del Mormón nunca habría contestado en hebreo; y si lo

que pretende usted es dirigirse a nuestros sabios, no es probable que usted pueda enseñarles nada". En eso tenía razón».

Las últimas palabras tenían una perceptible ironía en la ronquedad de su tono.

—Pero, aunque usted se haya acostumbrado a escribir en hebreo, pocos, seguro, pueden usar mejor el inglés —dijo Deronda, pretendiendo mostrar algo de consuelo para allanar el camino.

Mardoqueo sacudió su cabeza lentamente y contestó:

—Demasiado tarde, demasiado tarde. Ya no puedo escribir más. Mi escritura sería como esta respiración jadeante. Pero la respiración puede llevar a compasión, la escritura no. Si pudiera escribir ahora y usara el inglés, sería como el que da golpes a una tabla para convocar a los que no han oído más señal que una campana. Mi alma puede oír los propios defectos de su discurso. Escribir de nuevo sería como este cuerpo —Mardoqueo extendió sus brazos—, dentro de él puede habitar el Ruach hakodesh[215], el soplo del pensamiento divino, pero los hombres sonreirían y dirían: «Un pobre judío», y de los que sonrieran la mayoría serían de mi pueblo.

Mardoqueo dejó caer sus brazos, e inclinó la cabeza en actitud melancólica: por el momento había perdido la esperanza. El desaliento, inspirado por sus propias palabras, sobrevolaba sobre él, nublando su futuro. Se estaba hundiendo en una oscuridad repentina.

—Le comprendo, le comprendo perfectamente —dijo Deronda, con voz profunda y clara, que además de ser compasiva, era cordial—. Pero, perdóneme si hablo precipitadamente, lo que usted ha escrito no tiene por qué quedar en el olvido. Se puede conseguir su publicación. Si confía en mí, puedo proporcionarle todo lo necesario para conseguirlo.

—Eso no es suficiente —dijo Mardoqueo, rápidamente, levantando la vista de nuevo y recobrando sus recuerdos y su confianza—. No confío que usted haga solamente eso. No le pido que me dé una mano, sino su alma, que crea en mis creencias, que le conmuevan mis motivaciones, que espere lo que yo espero, que vea la visión hacia la que me dirijo, ¡que contemple la gloria como yo! —Mardoqueo se había acercado un paso mientras hablaba, y ahora tenía a Deronda cogido fuertemente por el brazo; su semblante, a poco más de un palmo de distancia, mostraba una especie de pálido ardor en él, una intensidad en su confianza que escondía una súplica apremiante, a la vez que continuó—: Será usted mi vida: será plantada de nuevo; crecerá. Usted recogerá la herencia que se ha ido preparando durante años. Decenas de

generaciones se han concentrado en mi corta vida como un puente: lo que ha sido hasta ahora y lo que será en el futuro se encuentran en este punto; y el puente se está rompiendo. Pero le he encontrado. Ha llegado usted a tiempo. Usted recogerá la herencia que el hijo infame rechaza por miedo a que el oro atraiga a los saqueadores y profanen su tumba; usted recogerá la herencia del judío.

Deronda se había quedado tan pálido como Mardoqueo. Tan rápido como si de una alarma de fuego o de inundación se tratase, se había apoderado de él no solo el temor compasivo a decepcionar a este pobre hombre que pedía una oración como el que está agonizando, sino el temor contrario a alimentar fatalmente una ilusión, y verse entregado a una causa que podía transformarse en una falsedad. La forma peculiar en que apeló a su compasión superó la repulsa que la mayoría de nosotros sentimos cuando notamos que nos cogen del brazo y nos hablan para pretender dominarnos. Para él la dificultad consistía en plantar sombras de duda sobre esta ardiente criatura sufridora, que condensaba gran parte de su breve existencia en un momento de confianza quizás extravagante. Con delicado instinto, Deronda, antes de abrir sus labios, depositó amablemente la palma de su mano en la mano extendida de Mardoqueo, un acto que equivalía a muchas palabras. Y tras este gesto dijo sin prisas, como si fuera consciente de que pudiera equivocarse:

—¿Olvida lo que le comenté cuando nos vimos por primera vez? ¿Recuerda que le dije que yo no era de su raza?

—No puede ser cierto —susurró Mardoqueo inmediatamente, sin inmutarse lo más mínimo. La mano compasiva que todavía estaba sobre él había fortalecido el sentimiento, más contundente aún que las palabras de negación. Se produjo una pausa apreciable, en la que Deronda se sintió incapaz de responder, realmente consciente de que la afirmación «No puede ser cierto» tenía el peso de un argumento para él, Mardoqueo, tan completamente obsesionado de la importancia suprema de la relación entre él y Deronda como para preocuparse de cualquier otro tema, añadió una segunda afirmación, que vino a sus labios como mera secuencia de su tan apreciada convicción:

—Usted no está seguro de su origen.

—¿Cómo lo sabe? —dijo Daniel, con un estremecimiento que le hizo retirar su mano de la de Mardoqueo, que a su vez dejó libre su brazo y se echó para atrás apoyándose de nuevo en la pared.

—Lo sé, lo sé; ¿qué es de mi vida si no? —dijo Mardoqueo, con un pequeño grito de impaciencia—. Cuéntemelo todo: cuénteme por qué lo niega.

No podía imaginarse lo que significaba pedirle eso a su interlocutor —cuánto le afectaba a su sensibilidad oculta, a la reticencia ferviente y consciente de tantos años—, de qué forma la incertidumbre sobre la que insistía como parte de su propia esperanza había significado siempre para Daniel la inquietante posibilidad de una dolorosa revelación sobre su madre. Pero el momento tuvo influencias no solo nuevas sino solemnes para Deronda: cualquier evasiva podía representar un abominable rechazo de alguna tarea que le correspondía a él, algún acto de justo compañerismo; en cualquier caso, sería una cruel negativa a una criatura que se dirigía a él con una esperanza desamparada bajo las sombras de un destino inevitable. Tras unos momentos, y haciendo un gran esfuerzo, decidido a contar toda la verdad brevemente, dijo:

—Nunca conocí a mi madre. No sé nada de ella. Nunca he llamado padre a ningún hombre. Pero estoy convencido que mi padre es inglés.

El tono profundo de Deronda temblaba mientras pronunciaba esta confesión; y a la vez sentía una gran sorpresa en su interior ante las extrañas circunstancias en que la expresaba. Parecía como si Mardoqueo apenas valorara su propio poder de averiguar las acciones del amigo que había escogido misteriosamente.

—Se verá, será declarado —dijo Mardoqueo, triunfante—. El mundo se desarrolla, y su estructura es tejida junto con el crecimiento del alma; nublado, nublado al principio, y luego cada vez más claro, la conciencia distingue las convulsiones lejanas. A la vez que los pensamientos se mueven oscuramente por nuestro interior y nos afectan antes de discernirlos completamente, así sucede también con los acontecimientos y con las personas: todos estamos entretejidos en el desarrollo del mundo. Usted apareció ante mí como un pensamiento aún no pronunciado: mi alma se conmovió antes de que aparecieran las palabras. El resto vendrá… vendrá.

—No debemos perder de vista el hecho que los acontecimientos externos no siempre han confirmado nuestras creencias —dijo Deronda, de forma dubitativa a causa de los dolorosos y conflictivos deseos que entraban en juego, en parte para no decepcionar demasiado a Mardoqueo y en parte para no dar a su confidencia un reconocimiento que podía esconder también una decepción.

El rostro de Mardoqueo, que se había iluminado al máximo en su última declaración, cambió de expresión ante las palabras de Deronda, aunque sin mostrar los rasgos de una confianza decepcionada: su expresión no perdió fuerza, sino que tan solo pasó del estado de triunfo al de firme resistencia.

—Podría usted recriminarme que todo esto es una alucinación, que la historia de la confianza de nuestro pueblo ha estado llena de quimeras. Me hago cargo. —Al decir esto Mardoqueo se detuvo un momento. Luego, inclinando un poco hacia delante la cabeza, dijo, en su ronco susurro—: *Lo mismo pasaría con mi confianza, si usted la envolviera en una ilusión. Pero no lo hará*.

La nitidez con la que estas palabras hicieron mella en Deronda, le hicieron comprender que se enfrentaba a una crisis con la que debía mantenerse firme.

—No tengo un especial interés en conocer cómo se produjo mi nacimiento —respondió—. Ese conocimiento estaría ligado a la sensación de ser reclamado. Y no puedo prometerle que intentaré averiguarlo pronto. Los sentimientos que han calado hondo durante más de la mitad de mi vida pueden todavía impedirme hacer lo que nunca hasta ahora he sido capaz de hacer. Se puede esperar cualquier cosa de ello. Tendría que conocer más de mi propia vida, y saber qué ocurriría si formara parte de la suya.

Mardoqueo había cruzado los brazos de nuevo mientras Deronda hablaba y le respondió con igual firmeza, aunque respirando con dificultad:

—Usted lo sabrá. ¿Para qué nos encontramos sino para que lo sepa? Sus dudas pesan tan poco sobre mi fe como el polvo. Conozco las filosofías de esta época y las de las anteriores: si quisiera podría responder ante sus tribunales. Podría acallar las creencias que son la lengua materna de mi alma y hablar con la lengua de un sistema aprendida de memoria, que es capaz de nombrar todas las cosas y que piensa que con eso se cubre todo. Podría acallarlas: ¿es que no puede acaso un hombre silenciar su asombro o su amor y buscar las razones que piden los demás? ¿Pero y si su amor reside en algo más profundo que en las razones que pueda encontrar? El hombre encuentra su camino: al principio había huellas de pisadas, como las de las bestias en la selva; ahora son ligeras e invisibles: su pensamiento se hunde en el océano y sus deseos atraviesan el aire: ¿pero ha encontrado todos los caminos? Lo que le afecta, se queda con él, le gobierna: debe aceptarlo, aunque no conozca su origen. Dígame, ¿las esperanzas que he depositado en usted han crecido como falsas esperanzas? ¿Esa es su duda? Bueno, mis esperanzas estaban ahí, y usted ha llegado. Muchos hombres han muerto de sed. Pero yo estaba

sediento y tengo el agua en mis labios. ¿Qué son para mí las dudas? En el momento en que usted venga y me diga: «Rechazo su espíritu: sé que no soy un judío: no tenemos el mismo destino», no tendré ninguna duda. Estaré seguro, seguro que he sido defraudado. Esa hora no llegará nunca.

Deronda notó un nuevo matiz en su forma de hablar: ahora era más imperiosa que suplicante —tenía algo más de poder consciente y menos de esa necesidad anhelante que había actuado antes implorando sobre él—. En general, aunque era todo lo contrario a una persona belicosa, ese cambio de actitud hacia él habría debilitado su tendencia a admitir cualquier petición. Pero había aquí algo que equilibraba su resistencia y la mantenía apartada. Este hombre fuerte de mirada tranquila y manos rosadas y saludables, acostumbrado a cualquier tipo de preguntas, al que acusaban de ser excesivamente independiente, sentía, sin embargo, la influencia de la certidumbre tenaz mostrada por esta frágil criatura que tenía ante sí, cuya pálida nariz se mantenía tensa por el esfuerzo de respirar y hablar de forma ansiosa. La influencia parecía fortalecer los lazos de la obligación compasiva. El deseo que tenía en estos momentos Deronda de escapar de una situación que podía llegar a ser muy embarazosa no tenía más posibilidades de convertirse en acción que las que tiene la desidia en alguien acostumbrado a hacer cada día lo mismo. Simplemente respondió:

—Será para mí un placer reunirnos y satisfacer sus deseos siempre que me sea posible. Al menos tengo claro que no quiero infravalorar su trabajo y su sufrimiento. Permítame conocer sus pensamientos. ¿Pero dónde podemos vernos?

—Ya he pensado en eso —dijo Mardoqueo—. No le será difícil venir a este barrio por las noches. Ya lo hizo una vez.

—Me las puedo arreglar de vez en cuando —dijo Deronda—. Imagino que vive usted bajo el mismo techo que los Cohen.

Antes de que Mardoqueo pudiera contestar, el señor Ram entró de nuevo a ocupar su sitio tras el mostrador. Era un hijo mayor de Abraham, cuya infancia había transcurrido durante los malos tiempos de principios de este siglo, y que permanecía entre esta generación perspicaz e instruida como una especie preservada, empapada por todas partes de los efectos de la pobreza y el desprecio, que eran la herencia común de la mayoría de judíos ingleses de hacía setenta años. No tenía nada de la zalamera vitalidad observable en el aspecto del señor Cohen: sus mismos rasgos —anchos y rollizos— mostraban esa tendencia a parecer mestizo sin causa, lo que, en un barrio misceláneo

londinense pueda quizás compararse con los prodigios de imitación en los insectos, y pueda deberse al esfuerzo imperfecto de la naturaleza proveniente de la raza caucásica para protegerle de la deshonra y las afrentas a que son sometidos los rasgos más puros en tiempos revueltos. El señor Ram se movía entre libros con la misma habilidad que si hubiera estado entre latas de carne —sin saber ni responsabilizarse de la proporción que puedan contener de podredumbre o alimento—. Pero consideraba a Mardoqueo como alguien muy instruido, y no le extrañaba que un caballero estudioso, cuyas visitas habían acabado por dos veces en compras, quisiera hablar con él. Saludó a Deronda de mala gana, y colocándose sus anteojos plateados, se abstrajo en las cuentas diarias.

Pero Deronda y Mardoqueo pronto estuvieron en la calle juntos, y sin ningún acuerdo explícito en cuanto a la dirección, caminaron hacia la casa de Esdras Cohen.

—No podemos reunirnos allí: mi habitación es demasiado estrecha —dijo Mardoqueo retomando el hilo de la conversación donde lo habían dejado—. Pero hay una taberna que no está lejos de aquí donde a veces voy a un club. Es *la Mano y el Estandarte*, en la calle que hay doblando la siguiente esquina, cinco puertas más abajo. Podemos hablar allí cualquier noche.

—Podemos probarlo alguna vez —dijo Deronda—. Pero tal vez me permita ofrecerle algún alojamiento donde se sienta más libre y cómodo que ahora.

—No; no necesito nada. Mi vida exterior es nula. No tomaré nada de usted menos valioso que la fraternidad de su alma. No voy a pensar todavía en nada más. Pero me alegro de que sea rico. No necesitaba el dinero de ese anillo de diamantes. Tenía usted otro motivo para traerlo.

Deronda se sorprendió un poco ante esta clarividencia; pero antes de que pudiera responder, Mardoqueo añadió:

—Pero habríamos acabado igual. Si hubiera necesitado el dinero, al final nos habríamos reencontrado de nuevo. Pero ¿es usted rico? —acabó, en tono de interrogación.

—Rico no, salvo en el sentido en que uno es rico si tiene más de lo que necesita.

—Deseaba que su vida fuera libre —dijo Mardoqueo, distraídamente—, la mía ha estado entre cadenas.

Estaba claro que no tenía ningún interés en que Deronda apareciera en casa de los Cohen más allá de la relación con su propio propósito. Ahora que

se había acercado al tema del que quería hablar, Deronda decidió abordarlo bruscamente, y dijo:

—¿Puede decirme por qué a la señora Cohen, la madre, no se le puede hablar de su hija?

No hubo ninguna respuesta inmediata, y pensó que debería repetir la pregunta. El hecho era que Mardoqueo había oído las palabras, pero tenía que trasladar su mente hacia el nuevo tema y dejar a un lado su preocupación pasional. Tras unos momentos, respondió con sumo cuidado, como si le hubieran preguntado por la carretera a Holborn.

—Conozco el motivo. Pero no hablaré de asuntos familiares que haya oído en el ámbito privado de la familia, aunque sean triviales. Respetaré su casa como si fuese un santuario. Su historia, mientras no perjudique a nadie, solo les incumbe a ellos.

Deronda notó como la sangre le subía a las mejillas por haber sido rechazado de una forma que no estaba acostumbrado, y se encontró dolorosamente confundido sobre un asunto en el que había considerado que podía obtener con toda seguridad un conocimiento decisivo. Era consciente de la fatiga emocional provocada por las inquietudes del día; y aunque tenía en su bolsillo el dinero para redimir su anillo, se abstuvo de su intención de visitar a los Cohen, pues no solo seguía con la incertidumbre anterior, sino que podía además encontrarse con la decepción de su desenlace.

—Lo dejaremos aquí por hoy —dijo, justo antes de llegar a la puerta de los Cohen; y Mardoqueo se detuvo y le miró con un rostro ansioso y fatigado bajo la luz de gas.

—¿Cuándo volverá? —dijo, con leve énfasis.

—¿Podemos dejar eso abierto? ¿Puedo preguntar por usted en casa de los Cohen cualquier noche cuando haya cerrado la librería? Supongo que no hay problema en que sepan que usted y yo nos vemos en privado.

—Ninguno —dijo Mardoqueo—. Pero falta más para los días que espero que los años que me quedan de fuerza. La vida se encoge: lo que no era sino una décima parte es ahora la mitad. Mi esperanza reside en usted.

—Seré leal —dijo Deronda. No podía haber dejado de pronunciar esas palabras—. Vendré la primera noche que pueda después de siete días: el sábado o el lunes, si es posible. Confíe en mí.

Le ofreció su mano desnuda. Mardoqueo, agarrándola con ansia, creyó sentir una nueva corriente de confianza, y dijo con algo de energía recobrada:

—Esto ha sucedido porque tenía que pasar; el resto llegará.

Esa fue su despedida.

LIBRO VI

Revelaciones

Capítulo 41

> Esto también es probable, según dijo Agatón: «Es verosímil que también sucedan cosas al margen de lo verosímil».
>
> ARISTÓTELES, *Poética*

IMAGINAD EL CONFLICTO QUE EXPERIMENTABA POR LA NOCHE TRAS LA ENTREVISTA con Mardoqueo una persona como Deronda, que no solo era muy sensible sino que además se implicaba activamente. Para un joven menos impresionable, la aventura podía haberle parecido demasiado estrambótica como para pensar en ella; pero había calado tan hondo en Deronda, que junto con la reacción habitual de su intelecto comenzó a examinar los motivos de su emoción, y a considerar hasta dónde debía aceptar dejarse llevar por ellos. La consciencia de que había sido medio dominado por la energética certidumbre de Mardoqueo, y aún más por su ferviente confianza, le hizo levantar la alarma. Formaba parte de su naturaleza escapar de la estupidez moral de valorar a la ligera lo que ocurría cerca de él, y de no querer ver en su propia vida de hoy las crisis que reconocía como trascendentales y sagradas en la vida histórica de otros hombres. Si hubiera leído este incidente como algo sucedido en Roma, Grecia, Asía Menor, Palestina o el Cairo, a un hombre joven como él, insatisfecho con su vida neutral, que buscara una relación más cercana y un deber más específico que le ilusionara por las posibles consecuencias de su trabajo, le habría parecido muy normal que el incidente hubiera causado una profunda impresión en este hombre lejano, cuya forma de vestir y de actuar las habría imaginado como parte de una época que conocemos sobre todo a través de sus efectos más serios. ¿Por qué debía avergonzarse de sus propios sentimientos inquietos simplemente porque se vestía para comer, llevaba una corbata blanca, y vivía entre gente que podía reírse por caer en la solemne locura de tomarse a sí mismo demasiado en serio? —esa fuente constante de irritación en que la falta de emociones graves pasa por ingenio—. Deronda huía de esa cobardía ante la ignorancia y estupidez a la moda. Pero también huía de que su vida fuera determinada simplemente por contagio, sin el consentimiento de la razón, o de permitir una compasión reverencial por la lucha espiritual que le lanzara por caminos oscuros.

¿Qué es lo que había pasado realmente, después de todo? Sabía con precisión la respuesta que habría dado Sir Hugo: un judío tísico, poseído por un fanatismo intensificado por las dificultades y la muerte inminente, se había fijado en Deronda como el modelo que anticipaba cierta visión imaginaria, la estirpe de la esperanza unida con el desespero: desesperanza de su propia vida, esperanza irreprimible en la propagación de sus creencias fanáticas. El ejemplo era tal vez extraño, excepcional en su forma, pero sustancialmente no era tan inusual. El fanatismo no era tan común como la insolvencia, pero tomado en todos sus aspectos era bastante abundante. Mientras Mardoqueo esperaba en el puente ver cumplidas sus visiones, otro hombre estaba convencido que tenía la clave matemática del universo que reemplazaría a Newton, y miraba a los demás físicos como conspiradores que querían mantener oculto su descubrimiento y dejar el universo indescifrable; otro, que tenía la clave metafísica, ligeramente diferente a la de los antiguos, pero que encajaba perfectamente. Se mirara en la dirección en que se mirara siempre se podía encontrar a una persona terrible, con más o menos don de palabra, bien con ojos brillantes o sobrenaturalmente apagados, en busca del hombre que tenía que oírle; y en la mayoría de los casos tenía tanto por decir que habría sido difícil imprimirlos en varios volúmenes, o leerlos si se hubieran impreso. Sucedía que este Mardoqueo tenía un aspecto más patético, un discurso más pasional y penetrante que el que solían mostrar tales monomaníacos: era más poético que un reformador social que pinta en colores el nuevo mundo moral en paralelogramos, o que un entusiasta en canalizaciones de aguas residuales; pero aún así era del mismo tipo. Sería del todo justo y honesto satisfacerle un poco, consolarle con la ayuda que fuera posible; ¿pero qué probabilidad había de que sus teorías tuvieran el valor que él les atribuía? En tales casos un hombre del mundo sabe qué pensar de antemano. Y en cuanto a la convicción que tenía Mardoqueo de haber encontrado una nueva personalidad que iba a trabajar con él, seguramente acabaría en la peor de las decepciones, esa que se presenta a sí misma como el punto final.

Deronda prestaba atención a estos susurros negativos; de hecho, se los repetía constantemente para sí. No era la primera ocasión, pero sí la más acuciante en la que había tenido que afrontar la cuestión de la similitud familiar entre los herederos del entusiasmo, fueran profetas o soñadores de sueños, fueran «Grandes benefactores de la humanidad, salvadores»[216], o fanáticos de descubrimientos imaginarios, desde el primer creyente en su propia inspiración irrevelada hasta el último inventor de la máquina ideal que

consigue el movimiento perpetuo. El parentesco de la pasión humana, la semejanza del panorama perecedero, inevitablemente conducen a la parodia y a la burla. Los errores y los desatinos han tenido sus sacrificios de mártires. Reducid al mayor hombre conocido hasta la fecha a una declaración abstracta de sus cualidades y esfuerzos, y no lo veréis tan claro: digamos que fuera alguien, que como Copérnico o Galileo, estuviera firmemente convencido a pesar de la incredulidad que le rodease; pero así es el que urde el movimiento continuo. Aunque no podemos probar nada con este tipo de pruebas. Si lo que pretendemos es evitar dar una falsa valoración y condenar algo que sea cierto, nada es mejor que la capacidad de entender el asunto sobre el que el hombre inamovible está convencido, y hacerse cargo del trabajo humano que ha supuesto, para evitar valorar una experiencia profunda a la ligera. ¿Diremos acaso: que los tiempos juzguen los esfuerzos y se vea si valen la pena? ¡Cómo! Nosotros somos el principio de los tiempos, que solo seguirán su dirección correcta si juzgamos bien todos y cada uno de esos esfuerzos. Ni las máquinas de vapor habrían visto la luz sin esa condición, sino que se habrían quedado en la mente de James Watt.

Deronda estaba lo suficientemente familiarizado con esta forma de pensar como para librarse de cualquier prejuicio despectivo hacia Mardoqueo, y no lo habría tenido incluso aunque en su diálogo no se hubiera producido esa peculiar demanda sobre él extrañamente guiada por una larga espera en la agitada mente del judío. Esta demanda, ciertamente, considerada de una forma racional, podría rechazarse justificadamente como ilusoria e incluso absurda; pero era precisamente lo que hacía que la súplica de Mardoqueo no solo fuese una llamada inmediata a su compasión sino sobre todo que se aferrase a su conciencia, que no dejaba de debatirse. Nuestras conciencias no son todas iguales, una liberación interior de leyes fijas: son la voz de sensibilidades tan variadas como nuestros recuerdos (que a su vez tienen sus parentescos y semejanzas). Y la conciencia de Deronda incluía sensibilidades más allá de lo común, aumentadas por su costumbre habitual de ponerse en la piel de los demás.

¿Cuál era la demanda que le pedía esta alma ansiosa? «Tiene que creer en mis creencias, que le conmuevan mis motivaciones, que espere lo que yo espero, que vea la visión hacia la que me dirijo, ¡que contemple la gloria como yo!». Interpretar esa súplica como una obligación en sentido directo habría sido ridículo, haberlo admitido sería deshonesto; y Deronda, recordando la agitación de esos momentos, se sintió agradecido que en medio

de su compasión se hubiera librado de las ataduras a falsas concesiones. La demanda pendía además de una suposición que podría estar —no, probablemente lo estaba— en desacuerdo con la realidad: la suposición de que él, Deronda, era de sangre judía. ¿Existió alguna vez una petición más hipotética?

Pero desde los trece años Deronda había asociado la experiencia más profunda de sus afectos con lo que era una pura suposición, a saber, que Sir Hugo era su padre: era una hipótesis que había sido fuente de ardientes luchas internas; gracias a ella se había habituado a refrenar sus sentimientos y hasta a quererlos. Se había acostumbrado a encontrar una razón en una concepción que podía ser refutada; y se había asimismo acostumbrado a pensar que alguna revelación podría llegar a influir su visión particular de sus deberes. Permanecer en un estado de suspense que a la vez era de actividad y escrupulosidad emotiva era algo habitual en su consciencia.

Así pues, ¿era posible que esa ansiada creencia en su origen judío, y ese extravagante ruego en convertirse en discípulo, fuera el presagio de un descubrimiento verdadero y de un desenlace espiritual genuino? ¿Era posible que las ideas de Mardoqueo convencieran realmente a Deronda? No, lo que era posible es que como Mardoqueo necesitaba y creía que había encontrado alguien en quien reabastecerse, Deronda podía recibir de su influencia la forma ideal completa de ese deber y ciudadanía personal que permanecía en su propio pensamiento como fragmentos esculpidos que aseguraban cierta belleza añorada, aunque difícil de encontrar por predicción.

Como en sus meditaciones se presentaba esa posibilidad, era consciente de que sería considerada como imaginaria, y comenzó a defenderla. Si la influencia a la que se imaginaba someterse hubiera sido la de un profesor respetable, alguna autoridad desde su cátedra, o algún filósofo de renombre, ¿habría alguien ridiculizado su completa adhesión? Solo lo habrían hecho aquellos que consideraran un signo de debilidad sentirse obligados por una idea y que prefieren sugerir que son capaces de expresar implícitamente de una forma más correcta lo que los demás declaran abiertamente con poca precisión. Después de todo, ¿qué era si no vulgaridad considerar el hecho que Mardoqueo fuese un pobre trabajador judío, y que tal vez se le encontrase en el recibidor de tierra del *Hand and Banner*, como motivo para determinar de antemano que no había en él ninguna fuerza espiritual que pudiera tener un efecto determinante en un caballero de manos blancas? Hay una leyenda en la que se cuenta que el emperador Domiciano, habiendo oído que había una

familia judía, de la casa de David, de donde iba a salir el señor del mundo, arrestó a sus miembros alarmado, pero rápidamente los liberó al observar que tenían manos de trabajadores, pues era de la opinión contraria de ese Rabino que esperaba de pie a las puertas de Roma, seguro de que hallaría al Mesías entre los desamparados que pasaban por allí. «Tanto el emperador como el Rabino se equivocaban al confiar en los signos externos: la pobreza y los harapos no son signo de inspiración», dijo Deronda a su objetor interno, aunque hayan aparecido en algunos casos notables. Y rechazar la posibilidad de ser discípulo de alguien así solo por ello sería bastante estúpido.

Era más razonable rechazar esa posibilidad por la tendencia a la emoción visionaria de Mardoqueo, que convertía sus deseos en impresiones opresoras, y le hacía ver los hechos externos como logros realizados. ¿Era probable que un temperamento así valorase prudentemente las consecuencias, única forma de evitar los errores fatídicos, aunque procedan de razones nobles? Pero quedaba por ver si así sucedía o no en Mardoqueo: tal vez la suya fuese una de esas naturalezas en las que la valoración prudente de las consecuencias está unida al fuego de la fe pasional que determina las consecuencias en las que cree. Las grandes inspiraciones del mundo han venido también de esta forma: incluso la ciencia más estricta y precisa apenas habría avanzado sin ese ardor profético que siente la excitación del descubrimiento de antemano y tiene una fe en la idea preconcebida que supera cualquier experimento fallido. Y respecto a los motivos y las acciones humanas, la fe pasional tiene una eficacia más plena. En esto el entusiasmo puede tener la validez de una prueba, y al suceder solo en un alma, dar el prototipo de lo que algún día será generalizado.

Al menos, argumentaba Deronda, la emoción visionaria de Mardoqueo apenas era una razón para concluir de antemano que no valía la pena escucharle salvo para compadecerle. Supongamos que se hubiera presentado como uno de los razonadores más precisos: ¿acaso forman ellos un cuerpo de hombres libres de obtener conclusiones falsas o de realizar especulaciones ilusorias? El argumento más riguroso tiene sus deficiencias, y concluye demasiado rápido que su estructura es lo suficientemente sólida como para explicar el universo. Los hombres pueden soñar con demostraciones, y trazar un mundo imaginario en forma de axiomas, definiciones y proposiciones, con el remate final Q. E. D.[217]. No hay fórmulas para el pensamiento que nos libren a los mortales del error en nuestra aprehensión imperfecta de la materia sobre la que se piensa. Y dado que el intelecto desapasionado puede llevarnos

hacia un terreno de fantasía propio de las matemáticas en el que nada es salvo lo que no es, tal vez un intelecto apasionado pueda vislumbrar en su visión pasional de posibilidades algo de la verdad de lo que será —una vida sólida que abarque mucho provee a la teoría con nuevo material, igual que la sensibilidad del artista se apropia de combinaciones que la ciencia trata de explicar y justificar—. En cualquier caso, no hay que fiarse de las suposiciones que apuntan hacia lo contrario. Tenemos que ser pacientes con las inevitables tentativas de nuestro pensamiento humano, bien en su conjunto, o en cada una de las mentes que conforman el conjunto. Colón tenía algunas impresiones que hoy llamaríamos supersticiones, y usaba algunos argumentos que rechazaríamos; pero tenía también conceptos sobre la naturaleza verdaderos, y tuvo la paciencia pasional del genio para conseguir que estos acusaran a la humanidad. El mundo ha acabado despreciando a los que no quisieron escuchar a Colón.

«Mi menosprecio hacia ellos me obliga a darme cuenta de que no debo cometer el mismo error a una menor escala», dijo Deronda, «y me tape los oídos al asumir que no puede haber ninguna relación trascendente entre este judío y yo simplemente porque ha revestido su argumento de nociones ilusorias. Lo que yo pueda ser para él, o él para mí, seguramente no depende para nada de lo que él piense acerca de la forma en que nos encontramos. A mí el camino sí me parece estar formado por lazos apreciables. Si no hubiera encontrado a Mirah, es probable que no me hubiera empezado a interesar de una forma especial por los judíos, y ciertamente no habría ido callejeando en busca de un tal Esdras Cohen que me hizo detenerme en la librería de Ram y preguntar el precio del *Maimon*. Mardoqueo, por su parte, imaginaba encontrar un discípulo, y con esta ilusión me vio; yo encajaba bastante bien con la imagen que tanto había anhelado. Me tomó por alguien de su raza. Supongamos que sus impresiones (el judío mayor de Frankfurt parecía tener algo así), supongamos que, a pesar de la lógica que apunta hacia lo contrario, sus impresiones resultaran de alguna manera ser ciertas, y que llegara a compartir alguna de las ideas a las que él se ha consagrado. Esta es de hecho la única cuestión que nuestro encuentro afecta a mi vida».

«¿Pero y si el resultado fuera otro? Bueno, entonces habría que pasar por un mal trago. Inevitablemente me convertiré en la causa directa de la impactante decepción de ese pobre tipo. Tal vez me tengo que preparar para ello. Temo que por mucho que le consuele no le aliviaré ni un ápice su dolor.

¿Sería la alternativa, que no le decepcionase, menos dolorosa también para mí?».

Aquí Deronda vaciló. Los últimos pensamientos habían calado muy hondo y habían desplazado la reticencia que había tenido con anterioridad a considerarse como probablemente judío. Y, si queréis, era romántico. Esa joven energía y espíritu de aventuras que habían ayudado a crear las leyendas extendidas por todo el mundo sobre jóvenes héroes en busca de las pruebas escondidas sobre su nacimiento y los deberes derivados de él, despertaron en él cierto interés estremecedor sobre la sencilla posibilidad de afrontar un nuevo destino —tanto más en cuanto ese destino le implicaba tanto en pensamiento como en acción—.

«La sencilla posibilidad». No podía admitir que fuera más que eso. La creencia de que su padre era un caballero inglés se hacía más fuerte ante las débiles dudas sin fundamento que de vez en cuando le asaltaban. Y pensar que podía llegar un momento en que esa creencia se convirtiera en una ilusión, era algo de lo que Deronda no iba a decir: «Me alegro». El afecto de toda una vida hacia Sir Hugo, más fuerte que todo su resentimiento, le hacía estremecerse ante esa posibilidad.

Fuera cual fuera el lado por el que se decantase la verdad, se repitió a sí mismo lo que había dicho a Mardoqueo —que no apresuraría su descubrimiento sin una razón potente—. Incluso se sintió tentado a considerar su incertidumbre como algo a valorar en el presente. Si las relaciones futuras no revelasen más que ilusiones como las que se esperaba que compartiera, la falta de ninguna evidencia válida de que él fuera judío podría librar a Mardoqueo de la decepción del rechazo de fraternidad. Podría incluso justificarse usar esta incertidumbre para mantener un suspense que induciría a Mardoqueo a aceptar la forma de amistad que Deronda quería que hubiese entre los dos.

Estas fueron las meditaciones que entretuvieron a Deronda durante cuatro días antes de que pudiera cumplir su promesa de preguntar por Mardoqueo en casa de Esdras Cohen, pues las ocupaciones que le mandaba Sir Hugo le entretenían hasta tan tarde que no había forma de realizar la expedición nocturna a Holborn.

Capítulo 42

> Wenn es eine Stufenleiter von Leiden giebt, so hat Israel die hochste Staffel erstiegen; wen die Dauer der Schmerzen und die Geduld, mit welcher sie ertragen werden, adeln, so nehmen es die Juden mit den Hochgeborenen aller Länder auf; wenn eine Literatur reich genannt wird, die wenige klassische Trauerspiele besitzt, welcher Platz gehührt dann einer Tragödie die anderthalb Jahrtausende währt, gedichtet und dargestellt von den Helden selber?
>
> ZUNZ, *Die Synagogale Poesie des Mittelalters*[218]

«SI HAY RANGOS EN EL SUFRIMIENTO, ISRAEL ESTÁ POR ENCIMA DE TODAS LAS naciones, si la duración de las penas y la paciencia que les ha sostenido ennoblecen, los judíos se hallan entre la aristocracia de cada tierra, si una literatura se considera rica por poseer unas pocas tragedias clásicas, ¿qué diremos de una Tragedia Nacional de quince siglos, en la que los poetas y los actores fueron también los héroes?».

Deronda había estado leyendo en los últimos días el pasaje de Zunz, y se le presentó a la memoria a modo de contraste mientras se dirigía hacia casa de los Cohen, pues ciertamente no conformaban una estampa de distinción ni en el dolor ni en cualquier otra forma de aristocracia. El aspecto de Esdras Cohen no era el del sublime patetismo del mártir, y su gusto por obtener dinero parecía favorecido por ese éxito que había sido la diferencia más exasperante de la avaricia de los judíos durante todos los años de su dispersión. El Jesurún[219] de un prestamista no era un símbolo de la gran tragedia judía; y aún así, ¿no había algo de típico en el hecho de que una vida como la de Mardoqueo —una frágil incorporación de la conciencia nacional, que respiraba con dificultad— anidara en la ignorante pero satisfecha prosperidad de los Cohen?

Radiante era la felicidad que mostraron sus rostros cuando Deronda regresó a su casa. El mismo Cohen aprovechó para comentar que, aunque el anillo de diamantes, si se hubiera redimido un poco más tarde, les habría dado más intereses, a él no le importaba eso en absoluto, comparado con el placer que tenían las mujeres y los niños de ver a un caballero cuya primera visita había sido tan agradable que «no habían hecho nada más que hablar de ella desde entonces». A la joven señora Cohen le sabía mal que el bebé estuviera durmiendo, pero muy contenta de que Adelaida no se hubiera acostado

todavía, y rogó a Deronda que no se quedara en la tienda, sino que entrara al salón para ver a la «madre y a los niños». Aceptó gustosamente la invitación, pues había traído algunos obsequios: un conjunto de figuras de papel para Adelaida, y una taza de marfil y una pelota para Jacob.

La abuela estaba ante una baraja de cartas y jugaba «a los platos» con los niños. Acababan de lanzar un plato pero no se había roto.

—¡Párese ahí! —dijo Jacob, corriendo hacia Deronda cuando este estaba entrando—. No pise mi plato. Espere y mire como lo lanzo de nuevo.

Deronda condescendió, intercambiando una mirada de comprensión con la abuela, y el plato dio varias vueltas antes de hacerse pedazos; entonces al visitante se le permitió entrar y sentarse. Se dio cuenta de que la puerta de la que Mardoqueo había salido en la anterior visita estaba ahora cerrada, pero quería mostrar primero interés en los Cohen antes de revelar su verdadero interés en su singular compañero.

No fue hasta que tuvo a Adelaida sobre sus rodillas y hubo ordenado las figuras de papel para que siguieran danzando sobre la mesa, a la vez que Jacob practicaba con la copa y la pelota, que Deronda dijo:

—¿Está ahora en casa Mardoqueo?

—¿Dónde está, Addy? —dijo Cohen, que había aprovechado un intervalo en el que no había nadie en la tienda para entrar y echar un vistazo.

—En el taller de allí —dijo su mujer, señalando hacia la puerta cerrada.

—El hecho es, señor —dijo Cohen—, que no sabemos lo que le pasa desde hace uno o dos días. Siempre está, como digo yo, algo tocado, ya sabe —en esto Cohen se señaló la frente—, no del todo racional en todas las cosas, como usted o como yo; pero es maravillosamente discreto y afanoso en el trabajo como lo pueda ser una pobre criatura, y cuida del chico como nadie. Pero estos dos últimos días ha estado moviéndose como un sonámbulo, o sentándose de forma tan rígida como una figura de cera.

—Es la enfermedad, pobre criatura querida —dijo la abuela tiernamente —. Dudo si la podrá soportar mucho tiempo.

—No, creo que solo es algo que le ronda por la cabeza —dijo la señora Cohen, la joven—. Se ha volcado últimamente en la escritura, y cuando le hablo tarda bastante tiempo en oírme y responder.

—Puede que nos considere un poco débiles —dijo Cohen, disculpándose —. Pero mi mujer y mi madre no se desharían de él ni aunque fuera un estorbo peor. No es que no sepamos cómo tratar estos temas, pero es nuestra

forma de actuar. Hay tontos que pierden haciendo negocios y no lo saben. Yo no soy uno de ellos.

—Oh, Mardoqueo lleva una bendición consigo —dijo la abuela.

—Hay algo que le preocupa ahora mismo —dijo Jacob, corrigiendo a su abuela—. Me ha dicho que no podía hablar conmigo y que no quería ni un trocito de bollo.

—No me sorprenden en absoluto los sentimientos que tienen ustedes hacia él —dijo Deronda—, pues yo mismo siento algo parecido. Hablé recientemente con él en la librería de Ram, de hecho, le prometí venir a buscarle para dar un paseo juntos.

—¡Entonces es eso! —dijo Cohen, dándose una palmada en la rodilla—. Ha estado esperándole, y eso le ha estado obsesionando. Supongo que le ha hablado de instruirle. Es usted inusitadamente amable, señor; pues no creo que obtenga mucho de él, viendo su posición. En fin, tengo que hacerme cargo de la tienda. —Cohen salió apresuradamente, y Jacob, que había estado oyéndolo todo al estar demasiado cerca de Deronda, le dijo con sencilla naturalidad—: Llamaré a Mardoqueo, si usted quiere.

—No, Jacob —dijo su madre—; ábrele la puerta al caballero, y deja que entre él. Y no hagas ruido.

El diestro Jacob entendió bien su papel, y giró la manecilla de la puerta tan silenciosamente como pudo, mientras Deronda permanecía detrás de él esperando en el umbral. La pequeña habitación estaba solamente iluminada por un fuego agonizante y una candela con una mampara que la cubría. En el tablero fijo situado bajo la ventana había esparcidos varios objetos de orfebrería, y algunos libros amontonados en la esquina. Mardoqueo estaba sentado en una silla alta enfrente del tablero y de espaldas a la puerta, con las manos juntas encima del tablero, y con un reloj apoyado sobre un soporte delante de él. Estaba en un estado de expectación tan enfermizo como el de un prisionero escuchando cómo se le retrasa su liberación, cuando oyó la voz de Deronda diciéndole:

—He venido a por usted. ¿Está listo?

Se volvió inmediatamente sin decir nada, cogió su gorra de piel, que tenía a mano, y se levantó para acercarse a Deronda. Enseguida llegaron al salón, y Jacob, dándose cuenta del cambio físico y de expresión de su amigo, le cogió del brazo y le dijo:

—¡Mira mi copa y mi pelota! —acercándole la pelota a la cara, como si quisiera animar a un convaleciente. Que Mardoqueo pudiera sonreír y decir:

«¡Bien, bien!» era un signo del desahogo de su tensión.

—Has olvidado el abrigo y la pipa —dijo la señora Cohen, la joven, y regresó al taller a por ellos.

—Ha vuelto a la vida, ¿lo ve? —dijo Cohen, que había entrado de nuevo, hablando en voz baja—. Se lo dije: Casi siempre estoy en lo cierto. —Luego añadió en su tono habitual—: Bueno, señor, no debemos entretenerle, me imagino; pero espero que esta no sea la última vez que nos veamos.

—¿Vendrá otra vez? —dijo Jacob adelantándose—. Mire, puedo coger el balón; seguro que lo puedo coger sin parar cuando vuelva de nuevo.

—Tiene manos hábiles —dijo Deronda mirando a la abuela—. ¿De qué parte de la familia las ha sacado?

Pero la abuela simplemente ladeó la cabeza hacia su hijo, el cual dijo enseguida:

—De mi parte. La familia de mi mujer no es así. Pero ¡válgame Dios! La nuestra es un tipo de ingeniosidad tan buena como la gutapercha[220]; puedes doblegarla hacia donde quieras. No hay nada que algunos viejos caballeros no harán si los pones a hacerlo. —Al decir esto Cohen hizo un guiño a espaldas de Jacob, pero cabría dudar si esta juiciosa alusión sirvió a su propósito, pues su sujeto soltó una risa nasal parecida a un relincho y se alejó pateando y cantando—: Viejos caballeros, viejos caballeros —en cadencia tintineante.

Deronda pensó: «Nunca sabré nada decisivo de esta gente hasta que no le pregunte a Cohen a bocajarro si perdió una hermana llamada Mirah cuando tenía seis años». Pero no parecía fácil encontrar el momento adecuado para enfrentarse a ello. Aún así, su primera sensación de repulsa por la ordinariez de esta gente estaba empezando a amortiguarse con sentimientos más comprensivos. Por muy brutas que fueran sus formas y su manera de hablar, tuvo que admitir que había cierto refinamiento moral en el trato que otorgaban al trabajador tísico, cuya agudeza mental les impresionaba aunque la consideraran un delirio inofensivo y silencioso.

—Los Cohen parecen tenerle afecto —dijo Deronda, tan pronto como él y Mardoqueo atravesaron la puerta de salida.

—Y yo a ellos —fue la respuesta inmediata—. Tienen el corazón del israelita dentro de ellos, aunque son como el caballo y la mula, que no miran más allá del estrecho camino que pisan.

—Me temo que le he hecho sentir mal —dijo Deronda, al tardar tanto en cumplir mi promesa—. Quise venir ayer, pero me fue imposible.

—Sí, sí, yo confiaba en usted. Pero es cierto que he estado intranquilo, pues el espíritu de mi juventud se agita en mi interior, y este cuerpo no es lo bastante fuerte para soportar el batir de sus alas. Soy como un hombre atado y prisionero por largos años: y de repente su compañero le da la palabra y lo libera de sus cadenas; ese hombre llora, titubea, la alegría que siente amenaza con salirse del tabernáculo del cuerpo.

—No debe hablar demasiado con el aire de esta noche —dijo Deronda, que notaba las palabras de confianza de Mardoqueo como cuerdas que le golpeaban dolorosamente—. Cúbrase la boca con su bufanda de algodón. Supongo que podemos ir al *Hand and Banner* y hablar allí en privado.

—No, este es el problema de que usted no viniera ayer. Pues esta es la noche del club del que le hablé, y no dispondremos de ningún minuto a solas hasta tarde, cuando ya todos se hayan ido. Tal vez sería mejor que buscáramos otro sitio. Pero solo estoy acostumbrado a ese. En los lugares nuevos el mundo exterior me presiona y estrecha mi visión interior. Y la gente de allí ya está familiarizada con mi rostro.

—No me importa el club si se me permite entrar —dijo Deronda—. Basta que a usted le guste más este lugar. Si no tenemos suficiente tiempo, volveré otra vez. ¿Qué tipo de club es?

—Se llama «Los filósofos». Son pocos, como los cedros del Líbano, hombres pobres dados a pensar. Pero ninguno es tan pobre como yo, y algunas veces han traído a visitantes de rango social superior. Se nos permite presentar a un amigo que esté interesado en nuestras materias. Cada uno pide una cerveza o cualquier otra bebida para pagar la sala. La mayoría fuma. Yo he ido cuando he podido, pues hay otros hombres de mi raza que también vienen, e incluso he hablado. Me ha gustado hallar una pequeña semejanza entre estos pobres filósofos y los Maestros que nos dejaron en herencia el pensamiento de nuestra raza: los grandes transmisores que trabajaron con su sudor por el pan escaso, pero que nos preservaron y aumentaron la herencia del recuerdo, y salvaron el alma de Israel como si fuera una semilla entre tumbas. El corazón se satisface con pequeñas semejanzas.

—Estaré muy contento de ir y sentarme entre ellos, si le va bien a usted. Es una especie de encuentro al que me gustaría unirme —dijo Deronda, no sin cierto alivio ante la perspectiva de un nuevo intervalo antes del esfuerzo que le suponía su próximo encuentro privado con Mardoqueo.

En tres minutos habían abierto la puerta de vidrio con la cortina roja y estaban en la pequeña sala, de apenas más de quince pies[221] de ancho, donde

brillaba la luz del gas entre la neblina del humo, una escena nueva e inesperada para Deronda. Media docena de hombres de diferentes edades, entre los veinte y treinta y cinco años, todos desharrapados, la mayoría de ellos con pipas de barro en la boca, escuchaban con mirada de concentración a un hombre con un traje color gris oscuro, de pelo rubio, nariz corta, frente ancha y de bastante envergadura, que sosteniendo su pipa ligeramente inclinada con su mano izquierda, y dándose golpes en la rodilla con la derecha, estaba precisamente terminando una cita de Shelley (la comparación de la avalancha de su *Prometeo desencadenado*):

> Como se amontonan los pensamientos, hasta que se descubre
> una gran verdad que resuena en las naciones.

La entrada de los recién llegados interrumpió la concentración, y requirió un reajuste de los sitios en el estrecho semicírculo que había alrededor del fuego y la mesa donde estaban los vasos, las pipas no utilizadas y el tabaco. Era este el más sobrio de los clubs; pero la sobriedad no es razón para que el fumar y el tomar algo sean menos necesarios para conseguir un rango decente en la compañía y el debate. Mardoqueo fue recibido con palabras de bienvenida que llevaban en sí una ligera cadencia de compasión, pero naturalmente todas las miradas pasaron inmediatamente a su compañero.

—He traído a un amigo que está interesado en nuestros temas —dijo Mardoqueo—. Ha viajado y estudiado mucho.

—¿Es el caballero anónimo? ¿Es un Gran Desconocido?[222] —dijo el citador de Shelley de anchas espaldas en un tono de humor.

—Me llamo Daniel Deronda. Soy desconocido, pero en ningún sentido que pueda considerarse grande. —La sonrisa que se abrió en el rostro grave del desconocido mientras dijo esto era tan agradable, que hubo un amplio murmullo general equivalente a un «Oíd, oíd», y el hombre de anchas espaldas dijo:

—Usted ensalza el nombre, señor, y es bienvenido. Aquí, Mardoqueo, ven a esta esquina enfrente de mí —añadió, evidentemente queriendo otorgar el lugar más acogedor al que más lo necesitaba.

Deronda estaba satisfecho con el sitio que consiguió en el lado opuesto, desde donde podía observar fácilmente a todo el grupo incluido Mardoqueo, que seguía siendo un objeto eminentemente insólito dentro de este grupo de figuras cortantes, de los cuales más de uno, incluso para Deronda, poco versado en estos temas, era probablemente de descendencia judía.

De hecho, la sangre inglesa pura (si las sanguijuelas o las sangraderas no nos desvían del producto preciso) no estaba presente de forma predominante en la asamblea reunida en esos momentos. Miller, el hombre ancho, un vendedor excepcional de libros de segunda mano que conocía el interior de los libros, tenía al menos abuelos que se decían alemanes, y posiblemente antepasados lejanos que negaban ser judíos; Buchar, el talabartero, era escocés; Pash, el relojero, era un judío bajito, moreno, vivaracho y muy tostado por el sol; Gedeón, el fabricante de instrumentos ópticos, era un judío del tipo pelirrojo, de rasgos generosos y que fácilmente pasaba por un inglés de maneras inusualmente cordiales; y Croop, el zapatero de ojos oscuros, era probablemente más céltico de lo que suponía. Solo a tres de ellos se les tomaría en cualquier parte como ingleses: Goodwin, el incrustador de madera, bien fornido, de aspecto honesto y voz agradable; Marrables, el rubicundo asistente de laboratorio; y Lily, el escribiente de rostro pulido, cuyo pelo castaño formaba un pequeño paralelogramo sobre su frente rellena, y cuya camisa, que llevaba junto con un traje no muy aseado, le otorgaba una frescura que podría considerarse insular, o incluso de algún lugar más pequeño.

Ciertamente, un grupo selecto entre los hombres pobres selectos, reunidos por un gusto que ya no prevalecía ni entre los herederos privilegiados de los instruidos y sus instituciones; seguramente ni siquiera serían capaces de divertir a un caballero cuyo interés por la gente con un sueldo semanal solo divisible en chelines se redujera a las comedias en torno al crimen o de baja clase social. Deronda, incluso aunque no se hubiera sentido influenciado más de lo normal por lo que ocurría entre él y Mardoqueo, no se habría puesto a buscar motivos de risa en los distintos matices del aspecto y la forma de hablar de estos hombres que parecían una caricatura de la sociedad refinada, y que probablemente se habían apropiado del conocimiento como la mayoría de nosotros conseguimos las indulgencias, sacando el máximo partido de las pequeñas oportunidades. Miró a su alrededor con el aire de respeto habitual en él entre iguales, pidió agua y *whisky*, y ofreció los contenidos de su caja de cigarros, que normalmente siempre llevaba consigo y apenas nunca usaba para sí, pues tenía motivos para no fumar, pero le gustaba permitir a otros que lo hiciesen. Tal vez era su debilidad por temer parecer conservador, y que le vieran como alguien muy rígido en vez de alguien capaz de ofrecer buena compañía. Pero que dio una impresión favorable al grupo lo probaba el hecho

de que no se encontraban menos a gusto que antes, y deseaban retomar su conversación interrumpida cuanto antes.

—Esta es una de las noches que yo llamo delicadas, señor —dijo Miller, que era aceptado implícitamente como una especie de moderador, dirigiéndose a Deronda a modo de explicación, y volviendo la cabeza hacia cada persona que mencionaba—. A veces, damos en el clavo. Pero esta noche nuestro amigo Pash, ha sacado el tema de la ley del progreso; y hemos seguido con las estadísticas; luego Lily, al decirnos que incluso antes de que las contásemos, ya sabíamos que en el mismo tipo de sociedades ocurren el mismo tipo de cosas, y que no era muy sorprendente que las cantidades fueran las mismas, pues con respecto a la sociedad los números se valoran cualitativamente (el número de borrachos es una cualidad de la sociedad); los números son un exponente de la cualidad, y no nos dan ninguna regla, solo apuntan a que consideremos las causas de la diferencia entre diferentes estados sociales; al decir esto Lily, hemos seguido discutiendo las causas del cambio social, y cuando usted vino, yo estaba hablando del poder de las ideas, al que atribuyo la principal causa del cambio.

—Yo no comparto eso, Miller —dijo Goodwin, el incrustador, más preocupado en proseguir con el tema que en esperar que el nuevo invitado dijera algo—. Pues o bien te refieres con las ideas a tantos tipos de cosas que en realidad no se sabe muy bien a qué, como si dijeras que la luz es una causa; o bien te refieres a un tipo de ideas en particular, y entonces tampoco estoy de acuerdo porque considero que es acotar demasiado el campo. Míralo de esta forma: todas las acciones en las que los hombres tienen que pensar algo son ideas; por ejemplo, sembrar semillas, o hacer una canoa, o cocer barro; y las ideas como estas surgen a la vida y continúan creciendo, pero no pueden separarse del material que las sacó a la luz. Forma parte de la naturaleza de la madera y de la piedra entregarse a la navaja que lleva en sí la idea de darles forma, y mientras haya madera y piedra se les seguirá dando forma. Yo creo que cuando las ideas se unen con el resto de elementos de la vida es cuando tienen más poder. Cuanto menos se unen, menos poder tienen. Y en cuanto a las causas del cambio social, yo lo veo de esta forma: las ideas son una especie de parlamento, pero hay una mancomunidad en el exterior y buena parte de la mancomunidad está trabajando en el cambio sin saber lo que hace el parlamento.

—Pero si la prueba de su valor está en esa unión —dijo Pash—, algunas de las ideas menos prácticas se lo cargan todo. Se extienden sin ser

entendidas, y entran en el lenguaje sin ser pensadas.

—Pueden actuar cambiando la distribución de los gases —dijo Marrables —; los instrumentos son tan precisos hoy en día, que se puede llegar a registrar el alcance de una teoría observando los cambios en el ambiente y los correspondientes cambios en las personas.

—Sí —dijo Parish, al que se le iluminó endiabladamente su rostro oscuro —, está la idea de las nacionalidades; diría que los burros silvestres ya la están oliendo, y se están volviendo más sociales.

—¿No comparte usted esa idea? —dijo Deronda, al encontrar una incongruencia sorprendente entre el sarcasmo de Pash y el fuerte sello de la raza en sus rasgos.

—Digamos, más bien, que no comparte su espíritu —dijo Mardoqueo, que había dirigido una mirada melancólica a Pash—. A menos que la nacionalidad sea un sentimiento, ¿qué fuerza puede tener como idea?

—Concedido, Mardoqueo —dijo Pash, de buen humor—. Y como el sentimiento de nacionalidad se está perdiendo, creo que la idea no es más que un fantasma, que camina anunciando la muerte.

—Un sentimiento puede parecer estar muriéndose y aún así revivir con más fuerza —dijo Deronda—. Las naciones han revivido. Puede que vivamos lo suficiente para ver un gran arrebato de fuerza en los árabes, que han sido inspirados con nuevo celo.

—Amén, amén —dijo Mardoqueo, mirando a Deronda encantado y recobrando energías: su actitud era más íntegra, su rostro denotaba menos cansancio.

—Puede que eso funcione con naciones retrasadas —dijo Pash—, pero con nosotros en Europa el sentimiento de nacionalidad está destinado a extinguirse. Durará un poco más en los barrios en que dure más la opresión, pero en ninguna otra parte. Toda la corriente de progreso va en su contra.

—Ay —dijo Buchan, en un débil y rápido tono escocés, lo cual fue como si entrase un poco de aire fresco en la conversación—, has hecho bien en traernos hasta este punto. Todos habéis estado de acuerdo en que las sociedades cambian, no siempre ni en todas partes, pero sí en total y a la larga. Ahora, con el mayor respeto, me gustaría remarcar que debemos examinar la naturaleza de los cambios antes de tener la garantía de llamarlos progreso; se supone que esta palabra implica una mejora, pero yo considero que no se ha escogido bien para este propósito, pues el propio movimiento hacia delante puede conducirnos a una ciénaga o a un precipicio. Y las

cuestiones que yo pondría son tres: ¿todos los cambios están dirigidos hacia el progreso? Si no, ¿cómo distinguimos qué cambio es progreso y cuál no? Y tercero, ¿hasta dónde y de qué manera podemos actuar sobre el curso de los cambios para promoverlo cuando es beneficioso, y para impedirlo cuando es perjudicial?

Pero el intento de Buchan de imponer su método en la conversación fue un fracaso. Lily dijo inmediatamente:

—El cambio y el progreso han surgido de la idea del desarrollo. Las leyes del desarrollo están siendo descubiertas, y se producen los cambios respecto a ellas necesariamente de forma progresiva; es decir, si tenemos alguna idea de progreso o mejora opuesta a ellas, esa idea es un error.

—De verdad que no puedo ver cómo llega usted a esa especie de certidumbre sobre los cambios llamándolos desarrollo —dijo Deronda—. Todavía quedará por valorar lo que nuestra voluntad y nuestros actos manifiestan como inevitable, así como el discernimiento para saber si hay que acelerar o retardar los procesos; todavía quedará el peligro de confundir una tendencia que deberíamos resistir y favorecerla con una ley inevitable, que me parece una superstición o un falso dios tan malo como cualquiera de las que existen sin la guía de la filosofía.

—Eso es cierto —dijo Mardoqueo—. ¡Malditos sean los hombres que no ven la oportunidad de resistirse en esta generación! Yo creo en el crecimiento, en la transformación, en el despliegue de una nueva vida cuya semilla es más perfecta, más llena de los elementos cargados con la forma divina. La vida de un pueblo crece, se entreteje junta pero se expande, en las alegrías y en las penas, en el pensamiento y en la acción; absorbe el pensamiento de otras naciones en sus propias formas, y devuelve el pensamiento como nueva riqueza para el mundo; es un poder y un órgano en el gran cuerpo de las naciones. Pero puede llegar un momento de freno; puede que se ahoguen los recuerdos, y el amor puede decaer por la falta de ellos; o bien los recuerdos pueden quedar relegados a reliquias marchitas; el alma de un pueblo, por la que este conoce ser uno, puede parecer estar agonizando por la falta de la acción común. Pero ¿quién dirá: «La fuente de su vida se ha extinguido, han dejado de ser una nación para siempre»?. ¿Quién lo dirá? No el que siente la vida de su pueblo agitándose en su interior. ¿Dirá acaso: «Los acontecimientos se tuercen, ¿no voy a resistir?». Su misma alma es la resistencia, y es como una semilla de fuego que aviva las almas de las multitudes, y toma un nuevo camino según los acontecimientos.

—No niego el patriotismo —dijo Gedeón—, pero todos sabemos que tú te refieres a algo en particular, Mardoqueo. Conoce usted la forma de pensar de Mardoqueo, supongo. —Al decir esto Gedeón se volvió hacia Deronda, que estaba sentado a su lado, pero sin esperar una respuesta, continuó—: Yo mismo soy un judío racional. Entiendo el apoyo a mi pueblo como una especie de relaciones familiares, y soy partidario de mantener nuestra adoración de una manera racional. No apruebo que nuestra gente se bautice, porque no creo en la conversión de un judío a la parte gentil del cristianismo. Y ahora que tenemos igualdad política, no hay excusas para ningún pretexto de ese estilo. Pero estoy a favor de librarnos de todas nuestras supersticiones y exclusividad. No hay razones en el presente para que no nos mezclemos gradualmente con la población entre la que vivimos. Eso es precisamente lo que marca el progreso. Me daría igual que mis hijos se casaran con cristianos o con judíos. Y soy partidario del viejo dicho: «La tierra de un hombre está donde él se encuentra bien».

—Esa tierra no es tan fácil de hallar, Gedeón —dijo el rápido Pash, encogiéndose de hombros y haciendo una mueca—. Tú ganas diez chelines a la semana más que yo, y tienes solo la mitad de hijos que yo. Si alguien montara un buen negocio de relojes entre las «mercancías de Jerusalén» yo iría… ¡eh, Mardoqueo! ¿Qué dices a eso?

Deronda, que escuchaba con atención las indirectas contra la opinión de Mardoqueo, se preguntaba en su interior en su persistencia en venir a este club. Para un espíritu entusiasta encontrarse continuamente con la indiferencia de hombres familiarizados con el objeto de su entusiasmo es aceptar un martirio lento, al lado del cual, el destino de un misionario al que en vez de rechazarle amablemente sus doctrinas es atravesado por un *tomahawk* parece apenas digno de compasión. Pero Mardoqueo no dio signos de amedrentarse: era un momento de plenitud espiritual, y le importaba más proclamar su fe que su inmediata acogida. Con un fervor sin rencor, sino más bien con el ímpetu del sentimiento al ver la oportunidad de hablar, contestó a Pash:

—Lo que yo digo es: dejad que cada uno de los hombres que desprecia la fraternidad y la herencia se mantenga apartada de ellas. Miles de hombres de nuestra raza se han mezclado con los gentiles como los celtas con los sajones, y puede que hereden la bendición que pertenece a los gentiles. Pero vosotros no podéis seguirlos. Pertenecéis a un pueblo en este mundo que debe caminar entre las naciones y debéis ser conocidos como judíos, y aunque haya quienes

tengan palabras tales como: «Ojalá no hubiera nacido judío. Repudio cualquier lazo que me ata al duro trabajo de mi raza, venceré a los gentiles mofándome de nuestra situación de separación», están alimentando de esta forma el odio en su interior por ser judíos, y mostrarán luego ese odio como veneno. ¿Puede acaso la reciente investidura de la ciudadanía penetrar dentro de la carne y cambiar la lenta sedimentación de dieciocho siglos? ¿Cuál es la ciudadanía del que camina entre gente con la que no tiene lazos de sangre o de amistad, y que ha perdido el sentido de la fraternidad con su propia raza? Es el salvoconducto de la ambición egoísta y el desafío avaricioso. Una persona así tiene el espíritu alienado, tenga el aspecto que tenga; chupa la sangre a la humanidad, no es un hombre, al no compartir el afecto de nadie, al no someter su alma a nada, se burla de todo. ¿No es cierto lo que digo?

—No exactamente, Mardoqueo —dijo Pash—, si te refieres a que yo pienso mal de mí por ser un judío. Lo que agradezco a mis padres es que haya menos zopencos entre nosotros que los que hay en otras razas. Aunque tal vez tengas razón en pensar que a los cristianos no les caigo bien por eso.

—Tampoco los católicos y protestantes se han llevado mejor —dijo el genial Gedeón—. Tenemos que esperar pacientemente a que se acaben los prejuicios. Mucha de nuestra gente está al nivel de lo mejor, y mucha de nuestra sangre se ha filtrado en las familias de rango. Soy partidario de que nuestras expectativas sean racionales.

—¡Yo también! —dijo Mardoqueo, rápidamente, inclinándose hacia delante con el ardor del que defiende su postura ante una discusión decisiva, y con sus las largas y escuálidas manos entrelazadas sobre su regazo—. Yo también reclamo ser un judío racional. Pero ¿qué es ser racional, qué significa sentir crecer dentro y fuera de uno la luz de la razón divina? Es ver cada vez más los lazos ocultos que vinculan y consagran el cambio como un desarrollo dependiente; sí, lo consagran con el parentesco: el pasado pasa a ser mi padre y el futuro tiende hacia mí los brazos conmovedores de los hijos. ¿Es racional secar la savia de los lazos familiares que enriquecen la vida de los hombres con el intercambio mutuo y ensalzan la variedad como la que existe en los bosques de cedros y palmeras? Cuando sea racional decir: «No conozco a mi padre ni a mi madre, que mis hijos sean ajenos a mí, que mis oraciones no se dirijan a ellos», entonces será racional para el judío decir: «No ambicionaré conocer diferencia alguna con el gentil, no tendré en estima la conciencia profética de nuestra nacionalidad, dejemos que el hebreo deje de ser, y dejemos que todos sus ritos pasen a ser trivialidades anticuadas, muertas

como un muro, imágenes de una raza especuladora. Pero dejemos que su hijo aprenda de memoria el discurso de los griegos, mediante el cual renuncia a sus compañeros a favor de la valentía de aquellos que lucharon los primeros en Maratón[223], que aprenda a decir lo que era noble en los griegos, ¡ese es el espíritu de una nación inmortal! Pero el judío no tiene recuerdos que le vinculen a la acción; dejemos que se ría de que su nación ha sido degradada como tal; dejemos que considere la memoria de su ley que llevó en su marco el aliento de la justicia social, la caridad y la santidad de los hogares, dejemos que considere la energía de los profetas, la preocupación paciente de los maestros, la fortaleza de generaciones martirizadas, como mera materia para una clase de historia. El judío debe preocuparse siempre en permanecer sereno como el gentil rico».

Mardoqueo se echó hacia atrás en su silla, y hubo un momento de silencio. Ni un solo miembro del club compartía su punto de vista o su emoción; pero toda su personalidad y su discurso les produjeron el efecto de una representación dramática llena de patetismo, pero sin consecuencias prácticas; normalmente le servía para desfogarse pero al mismo tiempo mostraba contradicciones. Deronda volvió a pensar en la trágica presión que debía haber supuesto las condiciones externas que impedían a este hombre, cuya fuerza parecía provenir de sí mismo, que su pensamiento calara en los demás, como un poeta entre gente que habla diferente, que pueden tener una forma de concebir la poesía, pero que no conoce su cadencia, y no puede provocar los mismos sentimientos que él ha descubierto en las virtudes latentes de su lengua materna.

El imperturbable Buchan fue el primero en hablar, y sugirió que se estaba perdiendo el tiempo.

—Considero —dijo—, que os estáis desviando de las cuestiones que he puesto sobre la mesa acerca del progreso.

—Digamos que se están escapando, Buchan —dijo Miller, encantado de su gracia, y al que no le habría importado que le llamaran volteriano—. No importa. Tengamos una noche judía, hace tiempo que no tenemos una. Llevemos la discusión al terreno judío. Supongo que no tendremos prejuicios en esto; somos todos filósofos; y queremos tanto a nuestros amigos Mardoqueo, Pash y Gedeón, como si no fueran descendientes de Abraham, igual que el resto de nosotros. Todos estamos emparentados por Adán, a menos que se pruebe lo contrario, y si ahondamos en la historia todos tenemos antecedentes deshonrosos. Así que no pretendo ofenderlos al afirmar

que no creo que el pueblo judío haya hacho grandes cosas ni haya tenido un papel importante en el mundo. ¿Qué ha hecho entonces? Creo que fue tratado inicuamente en tiempos pasados. Y supongo que no queremos que se maltrate a ningún hombre hoy en día, sea blanco, negro, moreno o amarillo, en eso estamos de acuerdo. Y eso me recuerda un curioso libro alemán que tengo (yo no puedo leerlo directamente, pero un amigo mío me lo estaba leyendo el otro día) sobre los prejuicios contra los judíos, y las historias que solían contarse contra ellos, ¿y cuál creéis que era una de ellas? Pues que se les había castigado con un mal olor en sus cuerpos; y eso, dice el autor, que es de 1715 (justamente he estado poniéndole precio al libro esta mañana), eso es cierto, pues los ancianos hablaban de ello. Pero luego, dice, las otras cosas son fábulas, como que el olor se iba inmediatamente cuando se bautizan, o que cada una de las diez tribus, fijaos, al ser las diez responsables de la crucifixión, tenían un castigo particular además del olor: Aser, recuerdo, tiene el brazo derecho un poco más corto que el izquierdo, y Naftalí tiene orejas de cerdo y huele como él. ¿Qué opináis de eso? Se han hecho muchos chistes de fábulas rabínicas, pero con respecto a las fábulas, yo creo que parte es cierto y parte no, en igual proporción. Sin embargo, como he dicho antes, sostengo como los filósofos del siglo pasado que los judíos no han hecho gran cosa como pueblo, a pesar de que Pash piense que son lo suficientemente inteligentes para vencer al resto del mundo. Pero si es así, ¿por qué no lo han hecho?

Por la misma razón que los hombres más inteligentes del país no consiguen entrar ni ellos ni sus ideas en el Parlamento —dijo el rápido Pash —; porque abundan los tontos de capirote.

—Esa es una cuestión sin sentido —dijo Mardoqueo—, el plantear si nuestra gente podría vencer al resto del mundo. Cada nación tiene su propia tarea, y es un miembro del mundo, enriquecida por el trabajo de cada una de las demás. Pero es cierto, como ya dijo Yehudá Haleví, que Israel es el corazón de la humanidad, si nos referimos al corazón como el eje central del afecto que une a una raza y a sus familias en el amor servicial, y la reverencia del cuerpo humano que eleva la necesidad de nuestra vida animal a la religión, y la ternura que es compasiva hacia los pobres y los débiles y hacia las criaturas sin voz que soportan el yugo por nosotros.

—No les gana ninguna nación en arrogancia —dijo Lilly—; y si están en última posición, no es precisamente por ser modestos.

—Bueno, cada nación se jacta de algo —dijo Miller.

—Sí —dijo Pash, y algunos lo hacen de los textos hebreos.

—En fin, si alguna vez contribuyeron a algo los judíos, ahora están bastante tranquilos —dijo Lilly—. Son el tipo de gente que se obstina en el pasado. Pueden desplegar buenas habilidades cuando se acogen a ideas liberales, pero como raza no pueden desarrollarse.

—¡Eso es falso! —dijo Mardoqueo, inclinándose de nuevo hacia delante con su anterior agitación—. Dejad que se conozca y se examine su historia; dejad que la semilla sea cernida, dejad que sus inicios sean trazados con las malas hierbas de las tierras salvajes, y más gloriosa será la energía que los transforme. ¿En qué otro lugar hay una nación de la que pueda decirse verdaderamente que su religión se entremezcla con la ley y la vida moral como el flujo de la sangre en el corazón y que crecen unidas? ¿En qué otro lugar existe un pueblo que mantuvo y desarrolló su bagaje cultural al mismo tiempo en que fueron odiados con un odio tan feroz como los fuegos del bosque que expulsan a la bestia salvaje de su guarida? Hay una fábula de los romanos, en la que un hombre nadaba para salvar su vida con un rollo de sus escritos sujeto en la boca para salvarlos también de las aguas. ¿Hay algo más cierto que esto en nuestra propia raza? Lucharon como héroes para mantener su posición entre las naciones: sí, cuando les trillaron las manos, se agarraron con los dientes; pero cuando el arado y el rastrillo pasaron por encima de los últimos signos visibles de su pacto nacional, y la infertilidad de su tierra se ahogó con la sangre de los sembradores y plantadores, dijeron: «El espíritu está vivo, hagámosle una morada duradera (duradera en cuanto movible) de forma que pueda ser transmitida de generación en generación, y nuestros hijos no nacidos puedan ser ricos en las cosas que han sido, y posean una esperanza basada en cimientos inalterables». Lo dijeron y lo trabajaron, a menudo respirando con pocas fuerzas, como si estuvieran en un féretro, o como si permanecieran heridos y tumbados entre una muchedumbre asesinada. Tratado como un perro sin dueño, el hebreo se hizo envidiar por su riqueza y su sabiduría, y fue desangrado de ella para llenar el baño de lujo de los gentiles; absorbió el conocimiento y lo divulgó; su raza dispersa era una nueva Fenicia trabajando las minas de Grecia y llevando sus productos al mundo. El espíritu nativo de nuestra tradición no consistía en quedarse de brazos cruzados, sino en usar los recuerdos como semilla y practicar las virtudes comprendidas en los libros de la ley y de los profetas; y mientras el gentil, que había dicho: «Lo que es vuestro es nuestro, y ya no es más vuestro», leía la letra de nuestra ley como una inscripción oscura, o utilizaba

los pergaminos como plantilla para los zapatos de una multitud rabiosa y llena de lujuria y crueldad, nuestros Maestros todavía la ensalzaban e iluminaban con nuevas interpretaciones. Pero la dispersión fue muy grande, el yugo de la opresión fue tanto una tortura insoportable como una carga; el exilio obligaba a relacionarse con gente bruta, en la que se perdió la conciencia de raza como les ocurrió a nuestros padres durante la persecución romana, los cuales se escondían en una cueva, y no sabían que era de día salvo por la débil luz de sus candelas. ¿A quién le maravilla que mucha de nuestra gente sea ignorante, estrecha de mente y supersticiosa? ¿A quién le maravilla?

Al decir esto, Mardoqueo, sentado al lado de la chimenea, se levantó y apoyó el brazo en la pequeña estantería; su excitación había crecido, a pesar de que su voz, que había empezado con una fuerza inusual, se estaba volviendo cada vez más ronca.

—¿A quién le maravilla? La noche ha caído sobre ellos y ya no ven; en su oscuridad son incapaces de ver el futuro: el sol alumbra a los profetas, y el día se ha oscurecido para ellos; sus observancias son como reliquias anónimas. Pero ¿qué nación de entre las principales de los gentiles no tiene una multitud ignorante? Se burlan de los ritos de nuestra gente ignorante; pero la ignorancia más maldita es la que no tiene ninguna observancia, hundida en la astuta avaricia del zorro, para quien cualquier ley no es más que una emboscada o el grito del sabueso aprensivo. Hay una degradación profunda bajo los recuerdos que ha degenerado en superstición. En la multitud de los ignorantes de tres continentes que observan nuestros ritos y confiesan la Unidad divina, el alma del judaísmo no está muerta. Revive el centro orgánico: permite que la unidad de Israel que ha configurado el crecimiento y la forma de su religión sea una realidad externa. Al mirar hacia una tierra y una forma de gobierno, nuestra gente dispersa en todos los confines de la tierra puede compartir la dignidad de una vida nacional que tiene una voz entre los pueblos del Este y del Oeste, que plantará la sabiduría y el talento de nuestra raza para que pueda ser, como en los viejos tiempos, un medio de transmisión y conocimiento. Dejad que esto ocurra, y el calor viviente se extenderá por las extremidades más débiles de Israel, y la superstición se desvanecerá, no en la anarquía de los renegados, sino en la iluminación de grandes hechos que ensanchan el sentimiento, y avivan el conocimiento como el joven despertar de los recuerdos amados.

La voz de Mardoqueo se había ido apagando, pero no era menos impresionante, gracias al brillo febril de su mirada. Su excitación

extraordinaria se debía ciertamente a la presencia de Deronda: era a Deronda a quien hablaba, y el momento tenía para él una solemnidad testamentaria que reanimaba todos sus poderes. Y la presencia familiar de los demás hombres promovía su expresividad, pues encarnaban la indiferencia que otorgaba una energía resistente a su discurso. No es que mirara a Deronda: parecía no ver nada inmediatamente a su alrededor, y si alguien le hubiera cogido del brazo, probablemente no se habría dado cuenta. De nuevo a Deronda le vinieron a la mente las palabras anteriores: «Tiene que esperar lo que yo espero, ver la visión hacia la que me dirijo, contemplar la gloria como yo». Regresaban con un patetismo más fuerte. Tenía ante él, como una realidad viva y sufridora, lo que hasta ahora solo había visto con un esfuerzo de la imaginación, que por su debilidad en comparación, parecía, de todas formas, exagerada: un hombre impregnado de pobreza y oscuridad, debilitado por la enfermedad, consciente de estar bajo la sombra de una muerte inminente, pero viviendo una vida intensa en un pasado y un futuro invisible, despreocupado de su suerte personal, excepto por que pudiera obstaculizar el bien concebido que nunca compartiría salvo como una breve visión interior, en un día lejano, al que nunca llegaría a ver, pero hacia el cual precipitaba los deseos de su alma, con una pasión que a menudo buscaba los motivos personales de la sana juventud. Era algo más que una grandiosa transfiguración del amor parental que soporta, resiste, renuncia y lucha en contra de las tentaciones suicidas de la desesperación —todo a causa de los pequeños, cuyo futuro se hace presente ante la mirada anhelante de la ansiedad—.

Todos los ojos estaban puestos en Mardoqueo mientras se sentaba de nuevo, y ninguno con descortesía; pero sucedió que el que le miraba con mayor simpatía fue el primero en rebatir sus ideas. Era el genial y racional Gedeón, que a su vez era consciente de estar dirigiéndose al invitado de la noche. Dijo:

—Tienes tu propia forma de ver las cosas, Mardoqueo, y como dices, esa forma te parece a ti racional. Sé que no piensas que la restauración de Judea se hará por un milagro, y lo mismo con otras cosas; pero eres tan consciente como yo que tanto los judíos como los cristianos han dicho muchas tonterías sobre el tema. Y en cuanto a la conexión de nuestra raza con Palestina, ha sido pervertida por la superstición hasta el punto de ser tan desmoralizante como la vieja ley de los pobres. La basura y la escoria van allí para ser mantenidas como pobres encarnados, y para ser especialmente cuidados por el ángel Gabriel cuando mueran. No sirve de nada luchar contra los hechos.

Debemos mirar hacia dónde apuntan; eso es lo que yo llamo racionalidad. Los hombres más instruidos y liberales entre nosotros ligados a nuestra religión son partidarios de depurar nuestra liturgia de tales nociones como una realización literal de las profecías sobre la restauración. Limpiadla de unos pocos ritos inútiles y de interpretaciones literales de ese tipo, y nuestra religión es la más simple de todas las religiones, y no será una barrera, sino una unión, entre nosotros y el resto del mundo.

—Es lo más simple que hay —dijo Pash, riendo irónicamente—. Arráncale las raíces, quítale las hojas y la corteza, sierra los nudos, y suaviza la parte de arriba y de abajo; luego colócala donde quieras, que no hará daño, nunca germinará. Puedes hacer un mástil, o puedes lanzarlo a la hoguera de la basura restregada. No entiendo por que nuestra basura se ha mantener sagrada más que la basura del brahmanismo o del budismo.

—No —dijo Mardoqueo—, no, Pash, porque tú has perdido el corazón del judío. La comunidad era sentida antes de llamarse buena. Yo no alabo la superstición, alabo las fuentes vivientes de la creencia que ha sido aumentada. ¿Qué es el crecimiento, la perfección, el desarrollo? Empezasteis con esa pregunta; yo la aplico a la historia de nuestro pueblo. Digo que el efecto de nuestro estado de separación no se completará y tendrá su mayor transformación a menos que nuestra raza retome de nuevo el carácter de una nacionalidad. Esa es la consumación de la confianza religiosa que los configuró como un pueblo, cuya vida ha inspirado a medio mundo. ¿Qué me importa que se haya perdido la pista de las diez tribus, o que multitud de niños de Judá se hayan mezclado con la población gentil como un río con otros ríos? ¡Contemplad detenidamente a nuestro pueblo! Arrastra sus faldas por el fango y permite que se enfanguen; pero tiene también una coraza enjoyada. Que los ricos, los amos del comercio, los versados en el conocimiento, los artistas, los oradores, los consejeros políticos, que llevan en sus venas la sangre hebrea que ha mantenido su vigor bajo todos los tiempos, y la flexibilidad del genio hebreo para el que la dificultad significa nuevas estrategias, que digan: «Estableceremos un modelo, nos uniremos en una tarea dura pero gloriosa como la de Moisés y Esdras, una tarea que será un fruto digno de la larga angustia por la que nuestros padres se mantuvieron separados, rechazando la comodidad de la falsedad». Tienen riqueza suficiente para redimir el suelo de los conquistadores depravados y empobrecidos; tienen la habilidad del hombre de estado para planificar, la lengua del orador para persuadir. ¿Y no hay profetas o poetas entre nosotros

para hacer que los oídos de la Europa cristiana se estremezcan de vergüenza por la horrible ignominia de la disputa cristiana que los turcos observan como la lucha de las bestias que han dejado en la arena? Hay sabiduría de sobra entre nosotros para fundar una nueva política judía, grande, simple, tal como lo era la antigua: una república donde haya igualdad de protección, una igualdad que brille como una estrella al frente de nuestra antigua comunidad, y que produzca más brillo que la libertad del Oeste entre los despotismos del Este. Entonces nuestra raza tendrá un núcleo orgánico, un corazón y un cerebro para vigilar, guiar y ejecutar. Los judíos ultrajados tendrán una defensa en la corte de las naciones, como los ingleses ultrajados en América. Y el mundo ganará si gana Israel. Pues habrá una comunidad en el vagón del Este que lleve la cultura y la solidaridad de cada gran nación en su seno: habrá una tierra en la que no tenga cabida la hostilidad, un terreno neutro para el Este como Bélgica lo es para el Oeste. ¿Dificultades? Lo sé que hay dificultades. Pero dejad que el espíritu de la victoria sublime arraigue entre nuestras gentes, y el trabajo empezará por sí solo.

—Ay, podemos admitir eso con seguridad, Mardoqueo —dijo Pash—. Cuando haya grandes hombres dispuestos para el cambio y profesores idealistas convertidos a tu doctrina, las dificultades se desvanecerán como el humo.

Deronda, que tendía por naturaleza a ponerse de parte de los que recibían las flechas, no pudo evitar replicar el comentario despectivo de Pash, y dijo:

—Si repasamos la historia de los esfuerzos que han conseguido grandes cambios, es sorprendente la cantidad que parecían inútiles a los que los miraron desde el principio. Consideremos algo que todos hayamos visto u oído: el esfuerzo por la unidad de Italia, que pronto veremos realizada en todas sus fronteras. Fijémonos por ejemplo en el primer sueño de Mazzini[224] cuando era un niño, sobre una Italia con una grandeza restaurada y una nueva libertad, y sus primeros esfuerzos de juventud para inculcar los mismos sentimientos en otros hombres jóvenes, y ponerlos a trabajar hacia una nacionalidad unida. Casi todo parecía en su contra; sus compatriotas eran ignorantes o indiferentes, hostiles al gobierno, e incrédulos a Europa. Por supuesto, los que despreciaban sus ideas parecían inteligentes. Pero ya ven, la profecía estaba con él. Mientras exista un remanente de conciencia nacional, supongo que nadie negará que se pueden agitar los recuerdos y las esperanzas que inspiren a la ardua acción.

—Amén —dijo Mardoqueo, que estaba completamente de acuerdo con las palabras de Deronda—. Lo que se necesita es la levadura, lo que se necesita es la semilla del fuego. La herencia de Israel late en el pulso de millones de personas; vive en sus venas como un poder incomprendido, como la exaltación matutina del ganado; es la memoria medio innata, moviéndose como en un sueño entre escritos en las paredes, lo que se ve con dificultad pero que no se puede dividir en palabras. ¡Que se encienda la antorcha de la comunidad visible! Que la razón de Israel se revele en una gran hazaña externa, y que haya otra gran migración, otra oportunidad de que Israel sea una nacionalidad cuyos miembros lleguen a los confines de la tierra, incluso como hijos de Inglaterra y Alemania, a los cuales les llevó lejos el negocio, pero que todavía tienen un corazón nacional y un tribunal de opinión nacional. ¿Habrá quien dirá: «No puede ser»? Baruch Spinoza no tenía un corazón judío fiel, a pesar de haber obtenido el fruto de su intelecto a partir de la tradición judía. Mostró la desnudez de su padre y dijo: «Los que se burlen de él serán los más sabios». Pero aún así Baruch Spinoza confesó que no veía por qué Israel no podía ser de nuevo un pueblo elegido. ¿Quién dice que la historia y la literatura de nuestra raza esté muerta? ¿No está tan viva como la historia y la literatura de Grecia y de Roma, que han inspirado revoluciones, han avivado el pensamiento de Europa, y han hecho tambalear los poderes injustos? Esta fue una herencia rescatada de la tumba. La nuestra es una herencia que nunca ha dejado de latir en millones de vidas humanas.

Mardoqueo había estirado sus brazos hacia arriba, y sus largas y escuálidas manos temblaron en el aire por un momento cuando dejó de hablar. Gedeón quedó sin duda bastante impresionado, pues aunque no dejó pasar mucho tiempo para hacer su objeción, su tono era más templado y de disculpa que antes; Pash, mientras tanto, apretándose los labios, restregándose la cabeza con ambas manos y frunciendo el ceño, con la expresión de alguien que está en contra del que está hablando, pero que no cree que valga la pena expresarlo. Hay una especie de pasta humana que cuando entra en contacto con el fuego del entusiasmo se cuece y endurece.

—Puede parecer bastante bien por una parte tirar de nuestros recuerdos y los que tenemos en herencia como haces tú, Mardoqueo —dijo Gedeón—; pero está la otra cara de la moneda. No todo es gratitud y gloria inofensiva. Nuestro pueblo ha heredado mucho odio. Todavía hay en el ambiente una gran cantidad de maldiciones y de rencor entumecido heredados de los

tiempos de la persecución. ¿Cómo justificas mantener un tipo de memoria y olvidar el otro? Hay feas deudas pendientes por ambas partes.

—Yo justifico la elección como se justifica cualquier otra elección —dijo Mardoqueo—. No aspiro a nada para la nación judía, no busco nada para ellos, excepto el bien que promete el bien para las demás naciones. El espíritu de nuestra vida religiosa, que está unido a nuestra vida nacional, no es odio a nada sino al error. El Maestro dijo: una ofensa al hombre es peor que una ofensa a Dios. Pero ¿a quién le sorprende que haya odio en el pecho de los judíos, hijos de ignorantes y oprimidos, a quién le sorprende, si hay también odio en el pecho de los cristianos? Nuestra vida nacional era una luz creciente. Que el fuego central se encienda de nuevo, y la luz llegará lejos. Los de nuestra raza que han sido degradados y despreciados aprenderán a pensar en su tierra sagrada, no como un lugar de mendicidad santa en el que esperar la muerte en ociosidad odiosa, sino como una república en la que el espíritu judío se manifieste en un nuevo orden basado en el antiguo, purificado y enriquecido por la experiencia que nuestros grandes hijos han reunido de la vida de las épocas. ¿Qué tamaño tiene? Solo hace dos siglos que un barco llevado por el océano desencadenó el principio de la gran nación americana. La gente creció como aguas que se encuentran (eran muy diferentes en costumbres y religiones), y llegó un tiempo, hace un siglo, en que necesitaron una organización política, y hubo héroes de paz entre ellos. ¿Cómo iban a formarla sino con la memoria de Europa, corregida y mejorada con su visión? Dejemos que nuestros sabios y ricos se muestren héroes. Tienen la memoria del Este y del Oeste, y su visión es completa y mejor. Una nueva Persia con una religión purificada magnificada en el arte y la sabiduría. Así será la nueva Judea, posicionada entre el Este y el Oeste, un refugio de reconciliación. ¿Se podrá decir que la visión profética de nuestra raza se ha mezclado sin esperanza con la locura y el fanatismo, que el ángel del progreso no tiene nada que decir al judaísmo, que es una ciudad medio enterrada para los asalariados expuestos, que las aguas la invaden como un campo abandonado? Yo afirmo que el principio más firme de desarrollo reside en la elección humana. Los hijos de Judá tienen que elegir que Dios puede escogerlos de nuevo. El tiempo mesiánico vendrá cuando Israel quiera implantar la insignia nacional. El Nilo se desbordaba y lo inundaba todo: el egipcio no podía escoger la inundación, pero eligió trabajar y hacer canales para las aguas fructíferas, y Egipto se convirtió en la tierra del maíz. ¿Acaso el hombre, cuya alma se sitúa en la realeza del discernimiento y la resolución,

negará su rango y dirá: «Soy un observador, no me pidas que tome decisiones»? Esta es la blasfemia de los tiempos de hoy. El principio divino de nuestra raza es la acción, la elección, la memoria decidida. Contradigamos la blasfemia, y contribuyamos a mejorar nuestro futuro y el futuro del mundo, no renunciemos a nuestro mejor don al decir: «Hagamos como si no estuviéramos entre las naciones»; al contrario, acojamos nuestra heredad plenamente, reclamemos la fraternidad de nuestra nación, y llevemos en ella una nueva fraternidad con las naciones de los gentiles. La visión está allí; será realizada.

Al acabar la última frase, que no fue más que un susurro en voz alta, Mardoqueo dejó que su barbilla se hundiera en su pecho y sus párpados se cerraron. Nadie dijo nada. No era la primera vez que había insistido en las mismas ideas, pero esta noche había ido un paso más allá. Su tranquila tenacidad ordinaria difería tanto de su exaltación presente como un hombre que en una conversación privada da razones por las que llevar a cabo una revolución de la que no se ve ningún signo difiere de uno que se siente responsable de una revolución empezada. La esperanza que había despertado la presencia de Deronda había llevado las ideas de Mardoqueo a un estado de convicción pasional, y había encontrado fuerza en su excitación para canalizar la inundación desbordante del argumento emotivo, con una sensación de urgencia como si estuviera ante una crisis que tuviera que ser dominada. Pero ahora le llegó, junto con la quietud provocada por la fatiga, una especie de asombro agradecido de haber hablado, una contemplación de su vida como un viaje que había llegado al final a este arroyo. Tras una gran excitación, la fuerza del impulso, al retirarse nos deja alejados de nuestro yo más activo. Y en los momentos siguientes a que Mardoqueo hundiera su cabeza, su mente vagaba por los caminos de su juventud, y en todas las esperanzas que le habían conducido hasta aquí.

Todo el mundo sintió que la conversación había concluido, y que el tono agudo y solemne de Mardoqueo no había sido apropiado para la discusión y la había convertido en algo apático. Era como si se hubieran reunido para oír el soplido del *shofar*[225], y lo único que podían hacer ahora era dispersarse. La desbandada fue inusualmente general, y en menos de diez minutos la habitación se vació a excepción de Mardoqueo y Deronda. A Mardoqueo le habían dado varias «buenas noches», pero era evidente que no las había oído, pues permaneció absorto e inmóvil. Deronda no iba a perturbar este descanso necesario, así que esperó a algún movimiento espontáneo.

Capítulo 43

> Mi espíritu es muy débil: la muerte
> me pesa como un sueño no querido,
> y cuestas y pináculos soñados
> de afán divino, anuncian ya mi muerte
> como un águila enferma cara al cielo.
>
> KEATS[226]

TRAS UNOS MINUTOS, LA INSÓLITA TRANQUILIDAD HABÍA PENETRADO LA CONCIENCIA de Mardoqueo, y levantó la vista hacia Deronda, sin ningún rasgo de aturdimiento o sorpresa, sino con una mirada de satisfacción reposada. Deronda se levantó y acercó su silla, para que no hiciera falta levantar la voz. Mardoqueo sintió el gesto como un paciente que siente la dulzura que le proporciona su almohada. Comenzó a hablar en voz baja, como si estuviera articulando palabras mientras pensaba, sin querer que estas llegaran a una audiencia.

—En la doctrina de la Cábala, las almas nacen una y otra vez en nuevos cuerpos hasta que se perfeccionan y purifican, y un alma liberada de un cuerpo desgastado puede unirse al alma del compañero que necesita, para ser perfeccionadas juntas, y cumplir con su trabajo terrestre. Entonces saldrán de la región mortal, y harán sitio para que nazcan nuevas almas provenientes del seno eterno. Es la imperfección de las almas ya nacidas que se demoran en la región mortal lo que impide que nazcan nuevas almas y la preparación del tiempo mesiánico: así, la mente ha dado forma a lo que está escondido, como la sombra de lo que se conoce, y ha dicho la verdad, aunque fuera solo en parábolas. Cuando mi alma, que lleva tiempo deambulando, se libere de este cuerpo exhausto, se unirá a la de usted, y su trabajo será perfeccionado.

La pausa de Mardoqueo parecía requerir de una respuesta por parte de Deronda. Trató de hacerla verídica; pero para los oídos de Mardoqueo estaba inevitablemente cargada de un significado tácito. Solamente dijo:

—Todo lo que pueda hacer conscientemente para que su vida sea efectiva lo haré.

—Lo sé —dijo Mardoqueo, en un tono de certidumbre sosegada que prescinde de convicciones futuras—. Ya lo he oído. Usted lo comprendió, está

de mi parte en cuanto a lo de la visión, y contempla los caminos de realización que otros niegan.

Permaneció en silencio unos instantes y luego continuó meditativamente:

—Usted retomará mi vida por donde se quebró. Siento haber retrocedido a ese día en que se quebrantó. El brillante sol de la mañana lucía sobre el muelle (era en Trieste), las prendas de hombres provenientes de todas las naciones brillaban como joyas, los barcos zarpaban, el navío griego que nos dejaría en tierra en Beirut se iba a poner en marcha en una hora. Yo iba con un comerciante como su escribiente y compañero. Dije que contemplaría las tierras y la gente del Este, y que hablaría con una visión más plena. Respiraba entonces como usted, sin fatigarme; contaba con el paso ligero y constante de la juventud, podía ayunar, podía dormir en el suelo duro. Me había casado con la pobreza, y amaba a mi novia, pues la pobreza era para mí libertad. Mi corazón estaba exultante como si hubiera sido el de Maimónides[227], con la fuerza de tres veintenas de años, y conociendo el trabajo en el que debía ocuparse. Era la primera vez que iba al Sur; mi alma sintió el sol; y de pie en el muelle, encima de un terreno que manaba luz, y cuyas sombras conformaban tonalidades gloriosas azul celeste como espíritus hechos visibles, me sentía en la cima de una vida divina, en la que mi propia corta existencia parecía fundirse, de forma que no la conocía; y me sobrevino un gran sollozo interno por la fuerza como me llego el éxtasis. Así que me quedé en pie esperando a mi compañero; y no le vi hasta que dijo:

—Esdras, he estado en correos y hay una carta para ti.

—¡Esdras! —exclamó Deronda, incapaz de contenerse.

—Esdras —repitió Mardoqueo, afirmativamente, absorto en su recuerdo —. Yo estaba esperando una carta; pues escribía continuamente a mi madre. Y el sonido de mi nombre fue como el toque de una varita que me remitía al cuerpo del que había sido liberado para fundirse con el océano de la existencia humana, libre de la presión de las ataduras individuales. Abrí la carta; y el nombre llegó de nuevo como un grito que me habría perturbado incluso en el seno del cielo, y me impulsó a buscar dónde residía el dolor: «¡Esdras, hijo mío!».

Mardoqueo hizo otra pausa; su imaginación se había detenido por la impresión de ese momento pasado hacía tanto. Deronda permanecía suspenso y casi sin respirar atento a lo que iba a venir. Se le había ocurrido de repente una extraña posibilidad. Mardoqueo tenía la vista hacia el suelo en contemplación abstracta, y tras unos breves momentos prosiguió:

—Era una madre de la que podía haberse dicho, sí, podría haberse dicho: «Sus hijos han crecido y la bendicen». En ella comprendí el significado de ese Maestro que, al percibir los pasos de su madre, se levantó y dijo: «¡La majestad de lo eterno se acerca!». Y esa carta era el grito de las profundidades de su angustia y desolación, el grito de una madre despojada de sus pequeños. Yo era el mayor. La muerte se había llevado a cuatro bebés uno tras otro. Luego vino, más tarde, mi hermana pequeña, que era, más que cualquiera de los demás, la niña de sus ojos; y la carta era un grito desgarrador hacia mí: «Esdras, hijo mío, me la han quitado. Él se la ha llevado y me ha dejado en desgracia. Ya nunca más volverán». —Al decir esto, Mardoqueo elevó la vista repentinamente, puso su mano sobre el brazo de Deronda, y dijo—: El mío era el destino de Israel. Por el pecado del padre mi alma tuvo que andar en el exilio. Por el pecado del padre, el trabajo quedó interrumpido, y el día de su realización retrasado. La que me cuidó estaba desolada, desgraciada, desvalida. Y volví. Desde el momento que tome la decisión, su espíritu y el espíritu de sus padres, que tenían verdaderos corazones judíos, actuaron en mí y me guiaron. Dios, en quien mora el universo, estaba en mí en la fuerza de la obediencia. Me di la vuelta y viajé, con muchos apuros, ahorrando lo poco que podía pero que ella necesitaría. Dejé el sol del sur y viajé hacia el frío helado. En la última parada pasé la noche expuesto al frío y a la nieve. Y ese fue el principio de esta lenta muerte.

Mardoqueo dejó que sus ojos vagaran y soltó su mano. Deronda reprimía con decisión las cuestiones que se barajaban en su interior. Mientras Mardoqueo estuviera en este estado de emoción, no convenía buscar más confidencias que las que vinieran de forma espontánea: más aún, él mismo sentía una emoción afín que le hacía temer que su propio discurso fuera demasiado trascendental.

—Pero trabajé. Estábamos desvalidos, se lo habían llevado todo. Y ella estaba enferma: la angustia que se apoderó de ella era demasiado fuerte, y trajo consigo una enfermedad escondida. Había veces que no soportaba ni el latido de su corazón, y las imágenes de su cerebro eran cámaras de terror en las que veía a mi hermana educada en el mal. En lo más oscuro de la noche la oía llorar por su hija. Entonces me levantaba, nos abrazábamos estrechamente y rezábamos. Vaciábamos nuestras almas en el deseo de que Mirah fuera librada del mal.

—¿Mirah? —repitió Deronda, queriendo asegurarse de que su imaginación profética no había engañado a sus oídos—. ¿Dijo usted Mirah?

—Así se llamaba mi hermana pequeña. Después de rezar por ella, mi madre solía descansar un rato. Duró apenas cuatro años, y un minuto antes de que muriera estábamos rezando la misma oración, yo en voz alta, ella en silencio. Su alma se marchó con sus alas.

—¿Nunca desde entonces ha oído hablar de su hermana? —dijo Deronda, tan tranquilo como pudo.

—Nunca. Nunca he sabido si fue librada del mal como lo pedimos. No lo sé, no lo sé. ¿Quién podrá decir dónde está su camino? La venenosa voluntad de los malvados es potente. Envenenó mi vida, me sofoca lentamente. La muerte se llevó a mi madre, y consideré una bendición que estuviera solo en los inviernos del sufrimiento. Pero ¿qué son los inviernos ahora? Están lejos. —Al decir esto, Mardoqueo cogió de nuevo el brazo de Deronda, y le miró con esa alegría del paciente febril que nos hiere con tristeza—: ya nada gime en la degradación de mi cuerpo. El trabajo quedará mejor hecho. Una vez dije que el trabajo de este comienzo era mío, he nacido para él. Pues bien, lo haré. Viviré en usted. Viviré en usted.

Le agarraba con fuerza convulsiva, y Deronda, agitado como nunca lo había estado —la certeza de que este hombre era el hermano de Mirah iluminaba su propia extraña relación con Mardoqueo con una nueva solemnidad y ternura—, sentía cómo su joven corazón latía con fuerza y sus labios palidecían. No se atrevía a decir nada. Temía, en el actual estado de exaltación de Mardoqueo (que ya hacía un supremo esfuerzo desde su debilidad), revelar cualquier dato sobre Mirah. Tenía miedo de que su respuesta estuviera por debajo de las altas expectativas, que fuera como una última llamarada de un fuego que se apaga, y provocar que se apagara más rápidamente. Su impulso dominante era hacer lo que ya había hecho anteriormente: puso su mano firme y gentil sobre la mano que lo sujetaba. La mano de Mardoqueo, como si tuviera alma propia —pues no era plenamente consciente de lo que hizo—, relajó su presión, y dio la vuelta para coger la de Deronda. Cuando las dos palmas se encontraron y se apretaron, Mardoqueo recobró algo de sentido, y dijo:

—Vayámonos ahora. No puedo seguir hablando.

Y de hecho se despidieron en la puerta de los Cohen sin haberse dirigido la palabra, simplemente con otro apretón de manos.

Deronda sentía un peso encima de él que era mitad alegría, mitad ansiedad. La alegría de encontrar en el hermano de Mirah una naturaleza mucho más que digna en relación con la de ella, conllevaba el peso de la

solemnidad y la tristeza; la unión entre hermano y hermana era en realidad el primer paso de una despedida suprema, como ese beso de despedida que se asemeja a un saludo, esa última mirada amorosa que se convierte en la punzada de dolor más intensa. Luego estaba el peso de la ansiedad sobre la revelación del hecho a ambas partes, y las cosas que sería deseable tener en cuenta antes de hacerlo. Supongo que todos nos habríamos sentido como se sentía Deronda, sin caer en el esnobismo o en la noción que los deberes fundamentales de la vida exigen un traje de día y de noche, que era un deseo admisible que el primer encuentro de Mirah con su hermano estuviese libre de cualquier condición externa irritante. El sentido común le indicaba alejar si era posible a Mirah del resto de los Cohen, a pesar de sus buenas intenciones, hasta que pudiera conocerlos bien y reconocer con gratitud la amabilidad que habían mostrado con su hermano. Iba a intentar por todos los medios que el entorno de Mardoqueo fuera lo más adecuado posible para su frágil estado, y que no dificultara que se relacionara con los demás, a parte de la perspectiva decisiva de que Mirah fuera a vivir con él, y cuidara de él el resto de su preciosa vida. En los dramas heroicos, los grandes reconocimientos no quedan gravados con estos detalles; y a buen seguro Deronda tenía un interés tan reverencial por Mardoqueo y Mirah como podía haberlo tenido en la descendencia de Agamenón[228]; pero a él le preocupaban los destinos que aún se movían por las oscuras calles de nuestra vida terrestre, que todavía no se habían elevado hacia las constelaciones, y vio que su tarea era muy fina y delicada, especialmente la de persuadir a Mardoqueo que cambiara de casa y de costumbres. Respecto a los sentimientos y a la decisión de Mirah no tenía dudas: habría una completa unión de sentimientos por la madre fallecida, y Mirah entendería la grandeza de su hermano. Sí, grandeza: esa era la palabra que Deronda escogió deliberadamente para referirse a la impresión que Mardoqueo le había producido. Se dijo a sí mismo, tal vez desafiando en parte su espíritu más negativo, que este hombre, por muy erráticas que fueran algunas de sus interpretaciones, este trabajador judío tan tísico vestido de harapos, alojado por caridad, que se entregaba a unos oyentes que no le hacían más caso que el que se hace a los repiques que suenan en las plazas de los mercados, disponía de los principales elementos de grandeza: una mente que acompañaba conscientemente y con energía a la mayoría de los destinos humanos, pero no sin ser menos consciente ni mostrar menos ternura hacia los pasos que daban los más próximos y necesitados; capaz de concebir y elegir una tarea que le ocupase toda la vida sobre cuestiones lejanas, y capaz

también del heroísmo no reconocido que rechaza la ruta del éxito ante la llamada del deber más cercano, que reside en el latido de los corazones más próximos a nosotros, como un pájaro que alimenta a su pollito recién nacido.

Deronda se sentía esta noche conmovido por tener que cargar con lo poco que quedaba de esta vida ferviente. Le había afectado en especial la indiferencia con que habían tratado a Mardoqueo sus amigos en el club. Su propia experiencia de lo poco que puede afectar el ardor en mentes ordinarias había incrementado sus reservas; y aunque para él la actitud más fácil era la tolerancia, tenía otra tendencia capaz de convertirse en una debilidad: no le gustaba aparecer excepcional o arriesgarse a insistir en su propia opinión de forma inefectiva. Pero esa prudencia justo ahora le parecía desdeñable, al haber visto un cuadro completo de las vidas que se consumen en un entusiasmo solitario y sentido como una realidad: mártires de circunstancias oscuras, exiliados en la rareza de sus propias mentes, que al volcarse en los demás no son para estos más que un largo soliloquio pasional —a menos que tal vez al final, cuando se acercan a las costas invisibles—, algunos signos de reconocimiento y realización penetren las nubes de la soledad; o quizás ocurra con ellos como con el agonizante Copérnico, que le hicieron tocar la primera copia impresa de su libro cuando ya se le había ido el sentido del tacto, y pudo verlo solamente como un objeto nublado entre las sombras profundas.

Deronda estaba cerca de alcanzar uno de esos exilios espirituales, y formaba parte de su naturaleza sentir la relación como una cadena pesada, más aún, sentir que su imaginación se dirigía sin repugnancia en la dirección de los deseos de Mardoqueo. Con toda su latente objeción a los proyectos que solo estaban definidos en general y fueran poco claros en los detalles, en el fondo de su corazón se sentía uno con este hombre que proféticamente le había seleccionado: las líneas de lo que podría llamarse su teoría emocional le habían conmovido. No tenía la conciencia judía, pero sí una añoranza, tanto más fuerte por la negación que había sido su agravio, tras la obligación de los reconocidos lazos filiales y sociales. Estaba preparado para la obediencia difícil. De esta forma aceptó su nueva tarea de buena gana; y de nuevo pensó que su principal ayudante sería la señora Meyrick. Era a ella a quien debía hacer saber en primer lugar el descubrimiento del hermano de Mirah, y con ella tenía que preparar los primeros pasos que había que dar para juntar a los dos hermanos perdidos. Felizmente, el mejor barrio para un paciente tísico no distaba mucho de la pequeña casa en Chelsea, y la primera tarea que tuvo que hacer Deronda para este profeta hebreo que le reclamaba como heredero

espiritual, era procurarle un albergue saludable. La ironía de las mezclas terrestres es tal, que los héroes no siempre han tenido alfombras ni tazas de té propias; y vistos por el vendedor de caballa a través de la ventana abierta, puede que hayan sido invitados con cierto optimismo a pagar el trescientos por cien con cuatro peniques. Sin embargo, la mente de Deronda estaba ocupada en ver cómo conseguiría que una residencia amueblada se llegara a parecer a una casa refinada, desmantelando sus propias habitaciones de sus mejores libros de pergamino, su silla más cómoda, y los bajorrelieves de Milton y Dante.

Pero ¿no iba a estar Mirah allí? ¿Qué mobiliario puede dar un mejor toque a una habitación más que el rostro tierno de una mujer? ¿Y existe alguna armonía de matices que provoque más encanto que la dulce modulación de su voz? Por lo menos, pensó Deronda, Mardoqueo va a recibir este bien por haber fijado su imaginación en mí. Ha recobrado a una hermana perfecta, cuyo afecto le está esperando.

Capítulo 44

Entre los cuentos folklóricos de hadas,
escucha la semilla que germina en primavera,
y como música para su baile
escucha cómo se despiertan los cercos de plantas,
sabia que tiembla en los brotes
y envía pequeñas corrientes rítmicas
de sonidos mágicos a oídos mágicos.
Y así, toda la belleza que aparece
nace como sonido para los sentidos más finos
y la inteligencia más despierta.

¿Y Gwendolen? Estaba pensando en Deronda mucho más de lo que él pensaba en ella, preguntándose a menudo cuáles eran sus ideas «sobre las cosas» y en qué ocupaba su tiempo. Pero un perrito faldero se hallaría necesariamente perdido si intentara comprender los motivos y aventuras de su vida a largo plazo; y Gwendolen estaba tan lejos de imaginarse que la vida de Deronda pudiera estar determinada por el destino histórico de los judíos, como de poder subir por los aires sobre un caballo metálico y desparecer en el horizonte en la forma de una estrella centelleante.

Con todo el sentido de inferioridad que había caído sobre ella, era inevitable que imaginara que estaba en los pensamientos de él ocupando un espacio mayor de lo que en realidad poseía. Solo las personas mayores y sabias no deben de ver su propia ansiedad o júbilo reflejada en otras mentes; y a Gwendolen, en su juventud y en su soledad interior, se le puede excusar por pensar demasiado en esos signos de interés especial que había en ella y mostrados por la persona que la había impresionado con la sensación de sumisión, y por confundir el color y la proporción de esos signos en la mente de Deronda.

Mientras tanto, ¿qué le diría él que debía hacer? «Dijo que tenía que interesarme más por los demás, y saber más de ellos, y que me tienen que importar las cosas mejores, ¿pero por dónde empiezo?». Se preguntó qué libros le habría él aconsejado llevarse a su habitación, y recordó los escritores famosos que ni había mirado ni había encontrado interesantes para leer, deseando con una media sonrisa que pudiera preguntar maliciosamente a Deronda si no eran los libros llamados «medicina para la mente». Entonces se

arrepintió de su descaro, y cuando estaba segura de que nadie la observaba hizo una selección miscelánea: Descartes, Bacon, Locke, Butler, Burke, Guizot, sabiendo, como una joven dama inteligente y educada, que estos autores eran ornamentos de la humanidad, estando segura que Deronda los había leído, y esperando que penetrando en ellos todos en sucesión, con su rápida comprensión podría llegar a un punto de vista más próximo a su nivel.

Pero era sorprendente el poco tiempo que podía sacar para estas vastas excursiones mentales. Constantemente tenía que aparecer en escena como la señora Grandcourt y sentirse observada en ese papel por los ojos severos de un marido que había hallado un motivo para ejercer su tenacidad: el de hacer que su matrimonio cumpliera con cualquier objetivo que fijara, y cuanto más lo cumplía más se daba cuenta de lo que a ella no le gustaba. Y ella misma, por mucho que internamente se rebelara, no podía dejar de cumplir con su papel. No había por el momento ningún sentimiento que la hubiera reconciliado con cualquier acto, palabra o mirada que significara una confesión al mundo: y lo que más temía era no controlar algún impulso violento que descubriera una confesión involuntaria: era su obstinación en permanecer callada en cualquier otro ámbito lo que la había lanzado con la mayor impetuosidad a descubrirse ante Deronda, en el que pensaba continuamente como una ayuda para ella. Montar a caballo, ir a cazar, las visitas que hacía y que recibía, todo lo llevaba a cabo con un espíritu de hazaña, que sirvieron para que todo el mundo alrededor de Diplow, durante esas semanas del año nuevo, pensaran que la señora Grandcourt llevaba sus honores, no con entusiasmo y alegría juvenil, pero sí con triunfo.

—Lo disfraza bajo un aire de tomarlo todo como algo natural —dijo la señora Arrowpoint—. Alguien que no la conociera supondría que ha condescendido más que haberse levantado. Siempre noté esa doblez en ella.

Para su madre Gwendolen vivía en una satisfacción completa, y la pobre señora Davilow fue tan engañada que tomó la inesperada distancia a la que la mantuvieron, a pesar de lo que creía ser un comportamiento muy hermoso por parte de Grandcourt en proveerla de lo necesario, como una gran indiferencia de su hija, ahora que el matrimonio había creado nuevos intereses. Ser llevada a almorzar y luego a cenar con los Gascoigne, ser conducida temprano tras el desayuno a la mañana siguiente, y recibir breves visitas de Gwendolen en las que su marido la esperaba fuera bien a caballo o bien sentado en el carruaje, era toda la relación social que se le permitía a su madre.

La verdad era que, la segunda vez que Gwendolen propuso invitar a su madre con el señor y la señora Gascoigne, Grandcourt al principio permaneció en silencio y luego dijo arrastrando las palabras:

—No podemos tener siempre a *esa gente*. Gascoigne habla demasiado. Los clérigos campestres son siempre aburridos, no dejan de hacer aspavientos perplejos acerca de todo.

Esa conversación estaba llena de un presentimiento para Gwendolen. Que a su madre la clasificaran como «esa gente» era suficiente para confirmar su previo temor a acercarla demasiado. Pero aún así, no podía decirle las verdaderas razones, no podía decir a su madre:

—El señor Grandcourt quiere rebajarte tanto como sea posible; y además, es preferible que no veas mucho de mi vida de casada, ya que acabarías por darte cuenta de que soy desgraciada. —Así que rechazó tan delicadamente como pudo cualquier alusión al tema; y cuando la señora Davilow sugirió de nuevo la posibilidad de venirse a una casa cerca de Ryelands, Gwendolen dijo —: No sería tan bueno para ti como estar cerca de la rectoría, mamá. Tal vez estaríamos muy cerca en Ryelands, pero echarías de menos a mis tíos.

Y a su vez, este veto despectivo de su marido hacia cualquier intimidad con su familia, al no querer que pensaran que era por ser invitados problemáticos, hizo que se pusiera más de su parte. Nunca había actuado con tanta amabilidad hacia su tío, tan dispuesta a revalorar su actividad alegre y complaciente y su espíritu de administración afable, incluso cuando se equivocaba, como algo más confortable que la eminencia neutral diaria que la dejaba fría. Y en esto tal vez estaba encontrando inconscientemente una expansión mental que era difícil conseguir en sus saltos ocasionales a los autores duros, que en lugar de mezclarse con sus agitaciones diarias requerían que las rechazara.

Fue una deliciosa sorpresa que el señor y la señora Gascoigne encontraran un día en Offendene a Gwendolen montada en su caballo sin su marido, solo con el mozo de caballos. Todos, incluidas las cuatro chicas y la señorita Merry, sentados en el comedor almorzando, pudieron ver su saludo de aproximación; e incluso las mayores no estaban desprovistas de ese sentimiento romántico isabelino de que la hermosa hermana sobre el espléndido corcel, que sostenía su cabeza como si estuviera orgulloso de llevarla, era una especie de Harriet Byron o de señorita Wardour[229], que reaparecía tras el «fueron felices para siempre».

Su tío se dirigió a la puerta a darle la mano, y ella saltó de su caballo con una presteza que bien podría alentar la noción de felicidad asegurada; pues Gwendolen se sentía hoy particularmente inclinada a tranquilizar el ánimo de su madre, y la sensación inusual de libertad al poder realizar esta visita sola la capacitaba para soportar la presión de los actos dolorosos que era necesario realizar. Los siete besos familiares no fueron tan agobiantes como solían ser.

—El señor Grandcourt ha salido, así que decidí llenar el tiempo viniéndote a ver, mamá —dijo Gwendolen, mientras se sacaba el sombrero y se sentaba a su lado; y luego, mirándola con un aire admonitorio y juguetón, le dijo—: Esto es un castigo por no llevar un lazo más bonito en la cabeza. No creías que viniera y lo detectara, ¡no te preocupas por ti nada en absoluto, mamá! —Y dio un golpecito cariñoso a su querida cabeza.

—Recrimíname, querida —dijo la señora Davilow, a la que se le iluminó encantadoramente su rostro desgastado—. Pero me gustaría que comieras algo después de tu carrera, en vez de estas migajas. Deja que Jocosa te haga una taza de chocolate como en los antiguos tiempos. Solía gustarte.

La señorita Merry se levantó inmediatamente y salió de la sala, aunque Gwendolen dijo:

—Oh, no, un pedazo de pan, o una de esas galletas duras. No puedo pensar en comer. He venido para despedirme.

—¿Qué? ¿Os marcháis de nuevo a Ryelands?

—No, nos vamos a la ciudad —dijo Gwendolen, partiendo un trozo de pan, pero sin llevárselo a la boca.

—Es un poco pronto para ir a la ciudad —dijo la señora Gascoigne— y el señor Grandcourt no está en el Parlamento.

—Oh, solo nos queda un día de caza, y Henleigh tiene algunos negocios con abogados, creo —dijo Gwendolen—. Estoy muy contenta. Me gustará ir a la ciudad.

—Verás la casa que tienes en la plaza Grosvenor —dijo la señora Davilow —. Tanto ella como las chicas devoraban con los ojos cada movimiento de su diosa, que pronto se iría.

—Sí —dijo Gwendolen, en un tono de asentimiento al interés de la expectativa—. Y hay tanto que ver y hacer en la ciudad.

—Me gustaría, mi querida Gwendolen —dijo el señor Gascoigne, en un tono de consejo cordial—, que usaras tu influencia con el señor Grandcourt para inducirle a entrar en el Parlamento. Un hombre de su posición tendría que dejar su peso en la política. Los mejores expertos confían en que el

ministerio tendrá que recurrir al país en esta cuestión de la siguiente Reforma, y el señor Grandcourt está preparado para la oportunidad. No estoy del todo seguro de que sus opiniones coincidan plenamente con las mías; no le he oído expresarse muy a fondo. Pero no miro al asunto desde ese punto de vista. Estoy pensando en que tu marido apoye el país. Y ha llegado a ese estadio de la vida en que un hombre como él debería entrar en los asuntos públicos. Una mujer tiene una gran influencia sobre su marido. Usa la tuya en esa dirección, querida.

El rector sintió que al decir esto se estaba exculpando de un deber, y reconociendo algo así como el aspecto de un beneficio público en el enlace de su sobrina. Para Gwendolen todo el discurso le olía a comedia amarga. Si hubiera sido feliz, se habría reído ante la explicación de su tío de que no le había oído expresarse muy a fondo en política. ¡Y en la gran influencia de la mujer! Las máximas generales sobre maridos y mujeres parecen ahora de una utilidad precaria. La misma Gwendolen había creído una vez en su futura influencia como una omnipotencia en controlar, sin saber exactamente qué. Pero su principal preocupación ahora era dar una respuesta que se considerara apropiada.

—Me encantaría, tío. Pero creo que al señor Grandcourt no le gustarían los problemas de una elección, a menos que ocurrieran sin la necesidad de dar discursos. Creía que los candidatos siempre hacen discursos.

—No necesariamente, en buena medida —dijo el señor Gascoigne—. Un hombre de peso y posición puede situarse sin recurrir mucho a ellos. Un miembro del condado no tendrá muchos problemas en ese sentido, y tanto fuera como dentro del Parlamento cae uno mejor si no es un gran orador. Dile al señor Grandcourt que te he dicho eso.

—Ya llega Jocosa con mi chocolate, después de todo —dijo Gwendolen, escapándose de la promesa de dar información que a todas luces habría sido recibida como inconcebible por el buen rector, el cual, apartando un poco la silla de la mesa y cruzando las piernas, parecía tan satisfecho como si fuera un espécimen apropiado de un clérigo magistrado que da un consejo experimentado. El señor Gascoigne había llegado a la conclusión de que Grandcourt era un hombre orgulloso, pero el amor propio del señor Gascoigne, calmado en la vida por la conciencia de su valía general y sus ventajas personales, no era tan irritable como para impedirle esperar lo mejor del marido de su sobrina solo porque dejaran a su tío de lado arrogantemente. Se debe permitir cierto desapego con el representante de una antigua familia;

no hay que pretender que esté de acuerdo incluso con las ideas abstractas. Pero la señora Gascoigne no era tan desapasionada como su marido, y atribuía la esquivez de Grandcourt a algo inculpable a Gwendolen.

—Tu tío y Ana muy probablemente estarán en la ciudad por Pascua —dijo, con una vaga sensación de expresar un ligero descontento—. El querido Rex espera conseguir honores y una beca, y quiere que su padre y Ana se encuentren con él en Londres, para que se regocijen juntos, como él mismo dice. No me extrañaría que Lord Brackenshaw les invitara, ha sido tan amable desde que regresó al Castillo.

—Espero que mi tío traiga a Ana a vivir a la plaza Grosvenor —dijo Gwendolen, arriesgándose incluso hasta este punto, dadas las circunstancias, pero deseando en realidad que nunca se viera obligada a acercar a nadie de su familia a Grandcourt de nuevo—. Me alegro mucho de la buena suerte de Rex.

—No debemos precipitarnos, y alegrarnos demasiado antes de tiempo —dijo el rector, que disfrutaba como nadie hablando de este tema, sobre todo ahora que se podía, una vez que el asuntillo con Gwendolen había terminado tan bien—. Aunque siguiendo los juicios imparciales, todo son grandes esperanzas para mi hijo, como un joven de cabeza singularmente brillante. Y de su excelente disposición y sus principios tengo la mejor evidencia.

—Algún día tendremos un gran abogado —dijo la señora Gascoigne.

—¡Qué hermoso! —dijo Gwendolen, con un escepticismo encubierto respecto a la hermosura en general, lo que dejaba que la palabra se aplicase más bien a los abogados.

—Hablando de la amabilidad de Lord Brackenshaw —dijo la señora Davilow—, no sabes lo encantador que ha sido, Gwendolen. Me ha rogado que me considerase su invitada en su casa hasta que pueda conseguir otra que me guste; lo hizo de la forma más elegante. Pero ahora ha aparecido una casa. El viejo señor Jodson ha muerto, y podemos ir a su casa. Es justo lo que quiero; pero sin nada horroroso que te haga desgraciada al pensar en ello. Y solo está a una milla de la Rectoría. ¿Recuerdas la casa baja blanca casi escondida por los árboles, cuando tomamos la vereda hacia la iglesia?

—Sí, pero no tienes muebles, pobrecita mamá —dijo Gwendolen, en un tono melancólico.

—Oh, estoy ahorrando dinero para eso. Ya sabes quién me ha hecho casi rica, querida —dijo la señora Davilow, poniendo su mano sobre la de

Gwendolen—. Y Jocosa nos cuesta tan poco que mantenga la casa, es maravilloso.

—Oh, por favor, déjame subir contigo y arreglarme el sombrero, mamá —dijo Gwendolen, llevándose de repente la mano al pelo y desarreglándoselo un poco, tal vez expresamente. Su corazón se estaba ensanchando y estaba a punto de llorar. Su madre habría estado peor, si no fuera por Grandcourt—. Supongo que no volveré a ver todo esto nunca más —dijo Gwendolen, mirando a su alrededor, mientras entraban en la habitación negra y amarilla; luego, se dejó caer en una silla enfrente de la ventana dando un pequeño gemido como de fatiga corporal. En su resolución por no llorar se había puesto muy pálida.

—¿No te encuentras bien, querida? —dijo la señora Davilow.

—No, ese chocolate me ha puesto enferma —dijo Gwendolen, alzando la mano para que se la cogiera.

—Se me debería permitir ir a tu casa si estás enferma, cariño —dijo la señora Davilow, con cierta timidez, a la vez que apretaba la mano contra su regazo. Algo le hacía ver hoy que su niña la quería, que la necesitaba como nunca.

—Oh, sí —dijo Gwendolen, inclinando la cabeza hacia su madre, aunque hablando tan superficialmente como pudo—. Pero ya sabes que nunca estoy enferma. Soy tan fuerte como puedo; y no debes apurarte por mí, sino ser tan feliz como puedas con las chicas. Son mejores hijas de lo que yo he sido, ya sabes. —Volvió su rostro con una sonrisa.

—Tú siempre has sido buena, querida. No recuerdo nada más.

—¿Cómo? ¿Qué es lo que hice que fuera bueno para ti, salvo casarme con Grandcourt? —dijo Gwendolen, en una desesperada resolución por parecer alegre, y alejarse del terreno peligroso de las emociones—. Y no lo habría hecho si no me complaciera a mí también. —Elevó un poco el mentón, y cogió su sombrero.

—¡Por Dios, hija mía! No te habría dejado que te casaras por mí. Tu propia felicidad es media felicidad mía.

—Muy bien —dijo Gwendolen, arreglándose el sombrero quisquillosamente—, entonces te contentarás con pensar que eres medio feliz, que es más de lo que estoy acostumbrada a verte. —Las últimas palabras las dijo con su vieja sonrisa juguetona—. Ya estoy lista; pero, oh, mamá, el señor Grandcourt me da una cantidad de dinero y espera que la gaste, y no puedo gastarlo; y ya sabes que no soporto la caridad para los niños y todo eso; así

que aquí tienes treinta libras. Quisiera que las chicas las gastaran por mí en pequeñas cosas para ellas cuando vayáis a la nueva casa. Díselo. —Gwendolen puso los billetes en las manos de su madre y apartó rápidamente la mirada, y se dirigió a la puerta.

—Dios te bendiga, querida —dijo la señora Davilow—. Les satisfará tanto que hayas pensado en ellas en particular.

—Oh, ellas son cosas inoportunas; pero no me importunan ahora —dijo Gwendolen, girándose y asintiendo alegremente. Apenas entendía su propio sentimiento en este acto hacia sus hermanas, pero en cualquier caso no quería que fuera tomado por algo serio. Estaba contenta de haber salido de la habitación sin mostrar más signos de emoción, y continuó el resto de su visita y todas sus despedidas con tanto decoro que se dijo sarcásticamente mientras regresaba a caballo: «Creo que estoy consiguiendo ser una muy buena señora Grandcourt».

Creía que su marido había ido a Gadsmere ese día; había deducido eso, igual que había deducido hacía tiempo quiénes eran los inquilinos de lo que él había descrito como «un lugar para perros en un país oscuro»; y los extraños conflictos de sentimientos en su interior tuvieron el efecto característico de enviarla a Offendene con una determinación fija —una forma de excitación innata en ella—.

Se maravillaba de sus propias contradicciones. ¿Por qué le amargaba que Grandcourt se preocupara por los seres que por su culpa ella misma sentía remordimientos? ¿No había decidido ella en su interior hablar y actuar en su nombre? Y dado que últimamente él había dicho que quería ir a la ciudad porque tenía que arreglar unas cosas de su testamento, ella debería haberse alegrado de cualquier signo que le mantuviera consciente de las necesidades de los de Gadsmere; y aun asi, ahora que era su mujer, la sensación de que Grandcourt había ido a Gadsmere le sulfuraba. Había sobrellevado esta indignidad en sus propios ojos —esta humillación de ser condenada a un silencio terrible para que su marido no descubriera qué es lo que conocía cuando se había casado con él; y como había dicho a Deronda, «tenía que seguir»—. Tras los intensos momentos de odio secreto hacia este marido que desde el principio la había atemorizado, siempre volvía la presión espiritual que hacía inevitable la sumisión. Cada signo de libertad que se le concedía le traía nuevas y peores humillaciones. Gwendolen no podía atreverse a nada salvo una acción impulsiva —menos aún podía desafiar con premeditación un futuro incierto en el que la única certeza fuera la indignidad—. A pesar del

remordimiento, parecía todavía un resultado peor de su matrimonio que se pusiera ella misma en evidencia; y su humillación resultaba aligerada al pensar que solo la señora Glasher era consciente del hecho que la causaba. Pues Gwendolen nunca había contado a Lush la entrevista en las Piedras Susurrantes; su tendencia a un vago terror envolvía cualquier amenaza de poder fatal en una omnipresencia escondida, y le dificultaba imaginar la forma por la que habían llegado las noticias a la mujer que tenía la habilidad venenosa de una bruja. Gwendolen creía que el secreto no había salido de la señora Glasher, y algunas de las palabras de la horrible carta implicaban que la señora Glasher haría revelaciones terribles al marido, así como a la usurpadora señora Grandcourt.

Había algo más, también, que creía que era un secreto para su marido, aunque en realidad no lo era tanto, a saber, la lucha reprimida de rebelión desesperada que ella misma temía. Grandcourt ciertamente no podía imaginarse del todo cómo le afectaban las cosas a Gwendolen: no se imaginaba nada de ella salvo lo que afectaba a la gratificación de su propia voluntad; pero en este punto tenía la sensibilidad parecida a la adivinación. Lo que observamos exclusivamente, sin fijarnos en nada más, podemos verlo confundiendo las proporciones; y no era probable que Grandcourt fuese infalible en sus valoraciones respecto a esta mujer controlada por muchos poderes ocultos, para él inexistentes. Magnificó su resistencia interna, pero eso no rebajó su satisfacción por el control que tenía de ella.

Capítulo 45

> Observad el carruaje de mi dama detenido en el camino,
> con un lacayo empolvado y un caballo que espera,
> barre la estera y pisa la escalera carmesí,
> su ardua función solo es «estar allí».
> Como Sirio[230] alzándose sobre el mar silencioso,
> esconde su corazón en un brillo altivo.

Así que los Grandcourt llegaron a la plaza Grosvenor a tiempo de recibir una carta de invitación para la fiesta musical en casa de Lady Mallinger, habiendo razones de negocio para que Sir Hugo supiera de antemano que su malquerido sobrino estaba viniendo. Era la tercera noche desde su llegada, y Gwendolen no prestó mucha atención a su nueva vivienda ni al mobiliario, preocupada con la certeza de que iba a hablar otra vez con Deronda, así como a ver a la señorita Lapidoth que había sufrido tanto, y «era capaz de someterse a cualquier forma de deber». Pues Gwendolen recordaba casi cada palabra que Deronda había dicho sobre Mirah, y especialmente esa frase, que se repetía a sí misma con amargura, al ser vagamente consciente que su propia sumisión era algo muy diferente. Se habría visto obligada a admitir, si alguien se lo hubiera dicho, que a lo que ella se sometía no era algo que tomase la forma del deber, sino que era sumisión a un yugo que le había llegado por una acción de la que se avergonzaba, y que lo soportaba con la fuerza de los motivos egoístas que no dejaban lugar al deber.

Las salas de recepción de Park Lane, todas blancas, doradas y de un pálido carmesí, estaban amuebladas con gusto y no había muchos invitados antes de que entraran el señor y la señora Grandcourt; y tras un intervalo de movimiento y charla siguió más de media hora de música instrumental. Klesmer se hallaba allí con su esposa, y en su interés benévolo por Mirah, propuso acompañarla en su canto del *O patria mia* de Leo, que anteriormente le había recomendado elegir, como algo que le aportase a ella más distinción que otra música más conocida. Estaba ya en el piano, y Mirah de pie de forma bien visible, cuando Gwendolen, sublime en su vestido aterciopelado de pálido color verde y con sus diamantes envenenados, fue conducida a un sitio de honor, bien a la vista de todos. Gracias a su buena vista y su autocontrol tenía el raro poder de distinguir rápidamente a las personas y objetos al entrar

en una sala llena, y mientras miraba a Mirah, no descuidó de intercambiar una inclinación de cabeza con Klesmer mientras pasaba por su lado. La sonrisa produjo en ambos un rápido destello que les recordó esa mañana en la que su ambición era ocupar el sitio de la «pequeña judía», y contemplar a una gran audiencia desde el rango superior de su talento, pero en lugar de ello, era una más de las del gentío ordinario, cubierta de seda y de gemas, cuya máxima actuación debía ser admirar o hallar fallos. «Cree que ahora voy por buen camino», se dijo con resentimiento escondido.

Gwendolen no había llegado a ver a Deronda mientras se dirigía a su puesto, y cuando se sentó y comenzó a entablar una conversación con Sir Hugo, miró a su alrededor con cuidada desenvoltura, saludando a los que reconocía por aquí y por allí, y temerosa de que su marido se diera cuenta si buscaba ansiosamente a Deronda, y le reprochara posteriormente de hacer algo «terriblemente vulgar». Pero cualquier viaje, incluso el que se hace con una lenta y gradual mirada por una habitación, trae consigo encuentros no deseados, y entre los ojos que se toparon con los de Gwendolen, que la obligaron a inclinar ligeramente la cabeza, estaban los del «principiante demasiado aficionado a Meyerbeer» —el señor Lush, al que Sir Hugo seguía encontrando útil como mestizo entre caballeros—. Estaba de pie cerca de su marido, quien, sin embargo, le daba la espalda, y se suponía que escuchaba a Lord Pentreath. ¿Cómo es que en este momento, por primera vez, le venía a Gwendolen, como una desagradable sensación, la idea de que este hombre conocía todo de la vida de su marido? Había sido apartado de su vista, según su deseo, y ella había quedado satisfecha; se había olvidado completamente de él, había sido apartado por otras personas que ocupaban el drama de su vida, en el que Lush no pintaba nada. Y de repente aparecía codo con codo con su marido, y le vino a la mente, como un recuerdo fabricado instantáneamente en un sueño, la sensación de que estaba relacionado con los secretos que la hacían desgraciada. Fue consciente del esfuerzo que supuso apartar de él la vista, intentando continuar su rastreo como si no hubiera visto nada más importante que una pintura en la pared, hasta que descubrió a Deronda. Pero él no la estaba mirando, y ella acabó apartando sus ojos de los suyos sin haber obtenido ningún reconocimiento, consolándose con la certeza de que tenía que haberla visto pasar. De hecho, no estaba lejos de la puerta con Hans Meyrick, del que se había preocupado que no faltara de la lista de Lady Mallinger. Ambos estaban más ansiosos de lo normal por temor a que Mirah no lograra lucirse. Deronda incluso se sintió a punto de ser traicionado

por sus emociones, sobre todo ahora que la presencia de Mirah le evocaba imágenes sucesivas de lo que había pasado hasta entonces y de lo que estaba por venir —todo centrado en el hermano que pronto le iba a descubrir a ella —; y escapó tan rápido como pudo del lado de Lady Pentreath, que había dicho con su voz de violoncello:

—Bien, su judía es hermosa, nadie puede negarlo. Pero ¿dónde está su descaro judío? Parece tan recatada como una monja. Supongo que lo aprendió de los escenarios.

Estaba empezando a sentir en nombre de Mirah algo parecido a lo que él había sentido por sí mismo en su época infantil angelical cuando Sir Hugo le preguntó si le gustaría ser un gran cantante —una aversión indignante a que se fijaran en ella de una forma gratuita y superficial, como si fuera una mercadería de importación pagada desdeñosamente por el público de moda, y le dolía aún más porque sabía que Mardoqueo sentiría que el nombre «judía» era tomado como una especie de sello, como la inscripción de una seda china —. Vio entrar a los Grandcourt en este estado susceptible, y Hans capturó inmediatamente su atención hablándole de «esa belleza propia de una duquesa de Van Dyck»[231]. Os ruego que perdonéis a Deronda que sintiera en este momento una renovación transitoria de su primer sentimiento de repulsa hacia Gwendolen, como si ella y su belleza y sus faltas fueran las culpables por subestimar a Mirah como mujer —un sentimiento parecido a la hostilidad entre clases, cuyo afecto por lo que no es reconocido del todo por los demás, ya sea en personas o en poesía, raramente nos permite escapar—. Cuando Hans admiró a Gwendolen con su hipérbole habitual, le respondió con un sarcasmo que no era del todo honesto:

—Pensaba que no podías admirar a ningún otro tipo de mujer que no fuera tu Berenice.

—Ese es el tipo que adoro, no que admiro —dijo Hans—. Los demás tipos de mujeres pueden perderme, pero Berenice podría hacerme más bueno, que es algo mucho más difícil.

—Silencio —dijo Deronda, bajo el pretexto que la canción iba a empezar. No estaba tan satisfecho con la respuesta como cabía esperar, y se sintió aliviado de que Hans avanzara unos cuantos puestos.

Deronda nunca había oído a Mirah cantar el *O patria mia*. Conocía bien la *Oda a Italia* de Leopardi (en la que Italia aparecía sentada como una madre desconsolada encadenada, escondiendo su rostro en sus rodillas y llorando), y las pocas palabras selectas le inspiraron con la grandeza del poema entero,

que parecía respirar a través de la música. Al cantar esto Mirah, la presencia de Mardoqueo era más que nunca una con la de ella. Ciertas palabras, a pesar de no estar incluidas en la canción, sonaban dentro de Deronda como armonías invisibles:

Non ti difende nessun de tuoi! L'armi, qua l'armi: io solo combatterò, procomberò sol io[232].

Parecían la misma voz de la pasión heroica que erróneamente se dice que se adora a sí misma en vano una vez ha conseguido el objetivo endiosado de su amor egoísta. Y esa pasión la sentía ahora Deronda como la viva imagen de un hombre que moría impotentemente lejos de la posibilidad de luchar.

Mirah sentía lo mismo. Mientras sonaba el aplauso general, Klesmer ofreció un testimonio más valioso, perceptible solo para ella:

—Bien, bien, el *crescendo* mejor que antes.

Pero su principal ansiedad era saber si había satisfecho al señor Deronda: cualquier error por su parte esta noche la habría apenado como una falta de consideración hacia él. Por supuesto, todas sus perspectivas se debían a lo que él había hecho por ella; y aún más, esta ocasión de cantar en la casa que era su hogar traía consigo una demanda peculiar. Ella le miró desde lejos, y él la vio; pero permaneció donde estaba, y observó la avenida de admiradores émulos que la rodeaban, y que enseguida hicieron hueco a Gwendolen, que se acercó para que el señor Klesmer se la presentara. Ahora que todo había ido bien para «la pequeña judía», Daniel cedió en su postura respecto a la pobre Gwendolen, al verla en todo su esplendor, y su memoria retrocedió, con cierto remordimiento por su dureza momentánea, a todos los signos y confesiones que delataban que también ella necesitaba ser salvada; y era una salvación mucho más difícil que la de una persona deambulando por el río, una salvación para la que él mismo se sentía impotente. La pregunta silenciosa: «¿Pero no es cobardía convertir eso en una razón para alejarse?», fue la forma en que enmarcó su decisión de acercarse a ella a la primera oportunidad, y mostrar su aprecio por sus confidencias del pasado, a pesar de las insinuaciones en su contra de Sir Hugo.

Klesmer, que se había levantado al acercarse Gwendolen, y que había sido incluido en la conversación con Mirah por ella, continuó cerca de ellos un rato más, mirando al suelo con una sonrisa, que estaba más bien en sus ojos que en sus labios, por el curioso contraste de las dos jóvenes y encantadoras criaturas sentadas en el diván rojo. La ansiedad parecía estar toda del lado de la más espléndida.

—Permítame que le diga lo agradecida que le estoy —dijo Gwendolen—. El señor Deronda me había dicho que estaría encantada de oírla cantar, pero no me imaginaba que lo fuera a estar tanto.

—Es usted muy amable —contestó Mirah, ocupada sobre todo en contemplar a Gwendolen. Era una experiencia de escenario totalmente nueva relacionarse con grandes damas genuinas con brillantes y cutis genuinos, y le impresionaron ampliamente como si salieran de un drama desconocido, en el que las partes se volvían más trágicas a medida que avanzaba la obra.

—Todos quisiéramos aprender de usted, yo, por lo menos —dijo Gwendolen—. Yo canto muy mal, como le dirá Herr Klesmer —al decir esto, dirigió la vista hacia el poder supremo, con aire malicioso, y continuó—: pero he sido rechazada por no gustarme ser mediocre, puesto que no puedo ser nada más. Creo que usted tiene una doctrina diferente. —Estaba todavía mirando a Klesmer, que dijo rápidamente:

—No si lo que quiere decir es que valdría la pena que usted estudiara más, y que la señorita Lapidoth tuviera el placer de ayudarla. —Dicho esto se marchó, y Mirah, tomándolo todo con seriedad ingenua, dijo:

—Si usted cree que podría enseñarle, estaré encantada. Tengo muchas ganas de enseñar, pero acabo de empezar. Si lo hago bien será porque me acuerdo de cómo me ha enseñado mi maestro.

Gwendolen no supo a qué atenerse pues no se esperaba está respuesta tan rápida y simple de Mirah, y queriendo cambiar de tema, dijo, alejándose un poco del tono con que se había dirigido a ella por primera vez:

—No ha estado mucho tiempo en Londres, creo, pero ¿le presentaron al señor Deronda tal vez en el extranjero?

—No —dijo Mirah—; no le había visto nunca de venir a Inglaterra en verano.

—Pero él le ha visto con frecuencia y le ha oído cantar bastante, ¿verdad? —dijo Gwendolen, en parte porque deseaba oír algo de Deronda, y en parte por la torpeza que supone para cualquiera llevar una conversación vacía de contenido—. Me habló de sus extraordinarias cualidades. Parece conocerla muy bien.

—Oh, yo era pobre y necesitaba ayuda —dijo Mirah, en un tono más sentimental—, y el señor Deronda me ha proporcionado los mejores amigos del mundo. Esa es la única forma por la que llegó a saber algo de mí, porque le di lástima. No tenía amigos cuando vine. Estaba muy afligida. Se lo debo todo a él.

La pobre Gwendolen, que había querido ella misma con esfuerzo ser una artista, no pudo dejar de observar que lo que ella habría considerado una forma más bien ruda de dirigirse hacia ella, no era más que una amable condescendencia para esta judía que estaba dispuesta a darle clases. El único efecto que producía en Mirah cualquier mención de Deronda, era despertar una gratitud reverencial y la preocupación de dejar bien claro que ella estaba en deuda con él.

Pero tanto él como Hans, que observaban a la pareja desde lejos, se habrían indignado si hubieran sabido que la conversación había sido conducida de tal modo que Mirah había tenido que reconocer la ayuda que había recibido. En sus movimientos, no obstante, había una delicadeza exquisita, que tal vez no habría podido expresar con palabras: el sentimiento de que no debía permitir que nadie pensara que Deronda no se había interesado generosamente por ella. La respuesta le encantó a Gwendolen: no pensaba en nada más que en la pronta compasión en la que ella, de otra forma, había confiado; y al ver que Klesmer también se disponía a tocar el piano se alejó satisfecha, sin presentir que esta protegida judía pudiera afectarla en su vida con algo más que la posible mejora de su canto —siempre que las ganas y el humor de la señora Grandcourt consintiera en tomar otras lecciones que las que le estaba dando la vida a un coste bastante alto—.

Con su acostumbrada alternancia de un decidido esmero en las apariencias a cierta indulgencia precipitada hacia el impulso, decidió, bajó el pretexto de alejarse un poco del instrumento, no volver a su sitio anterior, sino que se situó en un canapé donde solo podía tener un compañero al lado. Estaba más cerca de Deronda que antes: ¿fue una sorpresa que viniera a tiempo de estrecharle la mano antes de que empezara la música, y luego, después de que hubiera permanecido un rato de pie en la esquina del canapé en el sitio vacío, el repentino sonido de los bajos y los tiples, que confluían como una convulsión de la naturaleza, pareciera reducir la conducta de los mortales a la insignificancia, y quitarle importancia al hecho de que se sentara?

Pero cuando al final de la actuación de Klesmer la gente comenzó a hablar, lo que Gwendolen había esperado para hablar a sus anchas con Deronda, se dio cuenta de que el señor Lush podía oírles, pues estaba inclinado contra la pared cerca de ellos. No puedo evitar enrojecer de rabia, pero intentó adoptar una actitud de indeferencia cortés, diciendo:

—La señorita Lapidoth es tal como usted la describió.

—Ha tardado usted muy poco en darse cuenta —dijo Deronda, irónicamente.

—No he hallado en ella todas las excelencias de las que me habló, no me refiero a eso —dijo Gwendolen—; pero creo que canta de una forma encantadora, y ella también lo es. Su rostro es maravilloso, en absoluto ordinario; y es una joven muy completa. Creo que llegará a triunfar.

A Deronda le fueron gratas estas palabras, y no las respondió, sino que miró seriamente hacia delante. Ella sabía que estaba descontento con ella, y se estaba impacientando tanto por la cercanía del señor Lush, que le impedía hablar de lo que realmente quería, que meditó alguna estrategia desesperada para librarse de él, y permaneció también en silencio. Esa limitación pareció durar un buen rato, sin que Gwendolen ni Deronda se miraran el uno al otro, hasta que Lush liberó poco a poco a la pared de su peso y se unió a alguien que estaba más lejos.

Gwendolen inmediatamente dijo:

—Usted me desprecia por hablar artificialmente.

—No —dijo Deronda, mirándola fríamente—; creo que eso es excusable a veces. Pero no pensaba que lo último que estaba diciendo fuese artificial.

—Hubo algo que dije que le disgustó —dijo Gwendolen—. ¿Qué fue?

—Es imposible explicar tales cosas —dijo Deronda—. No se puede comunicar lo que uno siente con palabras.

—Cree que no estoy capacitada para entender lo que siente —dijo Gwendolen, con un ligero temblor en su voz, que intentaba dominar—. ¿Me he mostrado tan estúpida con todo lo que usted ha dicho? —Su mirada era indescriptible, intentando dominar las lágrimas de sus ojos, que estaban fijos en él.

—En absoluto —dijo Deronda, dulcificando un poco su voz—. Pero la experiencia es diferente según para quién. No todos sufrimos ante las mismas cosas. He tenido muchas pruebas de que usted no es estúpida. —Y le sonrió.

—Pero uno puede sentir cosas y no ser capaz de hacer nada mejor por ello —dijo Gwendolen, sin devolverle la sonrisa, pues notaba que Deronda le hablaba desde la distancia—. Empiezo a pensar que solo podemos ser mejor acercándonos a gente que nos haga tener buenos sentimientos. No debe sorprenderle nada de mí. Creo que es demasiado tarde para que cambie. No sé cómo empezar a ser prudente, como me dijo que fuera.

—Creo que raras veces mis palabras producen algún bien. No tenía que haberme entrometido en lo que no me concernía —dijo Deronda, pensando

con tristeza en que su intromisión acerca del desafortunado collar podía no terminar en nada más que en la pena añadida de verla, después de todo, apegada a otro tipo de juego peor que la ruleta.

—No diga eso —dijo Gwendolen, enseguida, viendo que esta podía ser su única oportunidad de expresar lo que sentía, y asustada ante el incremento de su propia agitación—. Si usted desespera conmigo, también yo desesperaré. Cuando me dijo que no debería seguir siendo egoísta e ignorante, me dio fuerzas. Si usted dice que preferiría no haberse entrometido en mis asuntos, eso significa que usted ya no confía en mí y me abandona. Y por consiguiente, usted decide por mí que no podré ser buena. Es usted el que va a decidir, puesto que podía haberme cambiado manteniéndome tan cerca de usted como le hubiera sido posible, y creyendo en mí.

Ella no había estado mirándole mientras hablaba, sino que miraba al asa del abanico que tenía en sus manos. Con las últimas palabras, se levantó y le dejó, regresando a su sitio anterior, que estaba libre; mientras, los demás iban callándose, esperando oír de nuevo la voz de Mirah, que a continuación, con esa calidad maravillosa del canto refrenado en que la melodía parece simplemente un efecto de la emoción, prosiguió con el *Per pietà non dirmi addio*[233].

Para los oídos de Deronda, su ardor era por el momento una continuación de la súplica de Gwendolen —una dolorosa inquietud de algo vago y difícil, irreconciliable con las condiciones impuestas, y aún así habría sido cruel resistirse—. Por muy extraña que fuera la mezcla que había en ella de un orgullo decidido y un aire precoz de conocer el mundo, con una indiscreta y precipitada astucia, estaba seguro ahora de que esa mezcla existía. Las insinuaciones de Sir Hugo le habían puesto en guardia contra peligros que su propia naturaleza habría rechazado; pero que la confianza de Gwendolen llegaba al punto de ni siquiera imaginarse que él podía malinterpretarla era algo tan manifiesto como la mañana, y esa seducción luchaba con su sensación de peligros presentes, y con el presentimiento de una creciente e incompatible reivindicación sobre él por su parte. Se palpaba en el ambiente el presagio de una colisión dolorosa: por un lado, Mardoqueo agarrándole con su mano moribunda, con todos los ideales y perspectivas que soñaba; por el otro, la bella criatura envuelta en seda y gemas, con su herida escondida y su miedo a sí misma, haciendo un esfuerzo de confianza para apoyarse y encontrarse sostenida. Era como si tuviera una visión de sí mismo implorando con los brazos estirados y gritando, mientras era arrastrado por las olas y

obligado a montarse en una barca que le fuera a llevar a una costa lejana. Esa era la sensación de agitación y preocupación que le producían las notas de la canción de Mirah; pero cuando se acabó se fue de su sitio pensando que había exagerado su propia importancia, y que era ridículo haber aceptado enseguida la visión que Gwendolen tenía de él, como si realmente pudiera tener algún poder decisivo sobre ella.

—¡Qué posición más envidiable la tuya! —le dijo Hans—, sentándote en un sofá con una joven duquesa y teniendo una discusión interesante con ella.

—¿Una discusión con ella? —repitió Deronda, algo incómodo.

—Oh, sobre teología, por supuesto, nada personal. Pero te dijo lo que deberías pensar, y luego te dejó alejándose con un porte admirable. ¿Es ella antinomianista?[234]. Si es así, dile que yo soy un pintor antinomianista y preséntamela. Me gustaría pintarla a ella y a su marido. Él tiene el tipo de hermosura que debía tener el Duque en *Lucrecia Borgia*[235], si para ello pudiera servir un buen barítono, que no puede. —Deronda esperaba sinceramente que lo que había contado Hans acerca de la impresión que su diálogo con Gwendolen hubiera producido en un observador lejano no fuera más que una representación fantástica, como era habitual en él.

Y Gwendolen era consciente que los ojos de su marido podían haber estado puestos en ella, buscando algo que reprochar, alguna ofensa contra su dignidad como mujer suya; su conciencia le decía que no había mantenido el aire perfecto de ecuanimidad en público, que era su ideal. Pero Grandcourt no le hizo ninguna observación a su conducta. Todo lo que dijo cuando eran conducidos de vuelta a casa fue:

—Lush comerá con nosotros entre el resto de los invitados mañana. Le tratarás con cordialidad.

El corazón de Gwendolen comenzó a batir con fuerza. Las palabras que quería exteriorizar, como alguien que devuelve una bofetada, eran: «Estás rompiendo tu promesa, la primera promesa que me hiciste». Pero no se atrevió a decirlas. Estaba tan asustada ante una pelea como si hubiera vislumbrado que acabaría con sus dedos estrangulándole el cuello. Tras una pausa, dijo en un tono más de defensa que de resentimiento:

—Pensaba que no tenías intención de que volviera a frecuentar la casa.

—Lo quiero solo por ahora. Me es útil; y hay que tratarlo con cordialidad.

Silencio. Puede llegar el momento en el que incluso un excelente marido que ha prometido dejar de fumar durante el noviazgo, por primera vez

presenta su caja de cigarros a su mujer, con el tácito entendimiento que tendrá que soportarlo. El señor Lush, por así decir, era un puro de los gordos.

Si estas son el tipo de promesas entre amantes de las que se ríe Júpiter, debe pasárselo muy bien.

Capítulo 46

> Si alguien me importuna preguntándome una razón por la que le amé, creo que no podría expresarlo de otra forma que con la respuesta: «Porque era él, porque era yo». Hay, más allá de lo que soy capaz de decir, no sé qué poder inexplicable que produjo esta unión.
>
> MONTAIGNE, *Sobre la amistad*[236]

HABÍA LLEGADO LA HORA DE PREPARAR A MARDOQUEO PARA REVELARLE QUE SU hermana había sido encontrada y para el cambio de residencia que era deseable que hiciera antes del encuentro de Mirah con su hermano. La señora Meyrick, a quien Deronda le había confiado todo excepto la peculiar relación que tenía con Mardoqueo, le había ayudado a encontrar una estancia adecuada en Brompton, a no muchos minutos de distancia a pie de su propia casa, para que ambos hermanos pudieran disfrutar de sus maternales cuidados. Su dichosa mezcla de fervor escocés y vivacidad gaélica le había permitido mantener bien el secreto tanto a las chicas como a Hans, pues cualquier revelación podía hacer levantar las sospechas de Mirah, y tirar por la borda el importante comienzo de ese trabajo que iba a asegurarle su independencia, como así llamamos arbitrariamente a una de las formas más laboriosas y dignas de nuestra dependencia. Y ambos, la señora Meyrick y Deronda, tenían más razones que las que podían expresar de querer que Mirah fuera capaz de mantenerse a sí misma. Tal vez «la madrecita» mantenía el sigilo por las dudas que albergaba respecto al hermano remarcable que le habían descrito; y ciertamente, si sentía alegría y admiración anticipada, era por la fe que tenía en el buen sentido de Deronda. La debilidad de Mardoqueo era un hecho que apelaba a su ternura; pero ¿cómo iba ella a alegrarse de un entusiasmo que, a decir verdad, no podía más que considerar como terquedad judía, y como la presentación indeseable de un hombre cuya conversación no sería más moderna ni animada que la de los Covenanters de Scott?[237]. Su mentalidad era de todo menos prosaica, y compartía parte del encanto de Mab en el romance de la historia de Mirah y su estancia con ellas; pero lo romántico o inusual en la vida real requiere cierta adaptación. Nos sentamos por las noches a leer sobre Sakyamuni[238], San Francisco u Oliver Cromwell; pero otra cosa es que nos gustara que alguien como ellos nos llamara a la puerta a la mañana siguiente, o incluso que se revelara como una nueva relación.

Además, la señora Meyrick había esperado, igual que sus hijas, que el apego de Mirah al judaísmo disminuiría gradualmente, y se uniría poco a poco a la corriente profunda del intercambio afectuoso con sus nuevas amigas. De hecho, lo que más le gustaba secretamente de esta historia es no haber descubierto otras relaciones judías, sino algo mucho más favorable a las esperanzas que ella veía en Hans. Y ahora aparecía un hermano que hundiría a Mirah de nuevo en lo más profundo del sentimiento judío. No pudo evitar decir a Deronda:

—Estoy tan contenta como usted de que su hermano no sea el prestamista: hay Esdras y Esdras en el mundo; y realmente es un consuelo pensar que no todos los judíos son como esos vendedores que no te dejan salir de su tienda; y además, lo que le dijo a usted sobre su madre y su hermana me hace pensar bien de él. Estoy segura de que es bueno. Pero yo nunca hice nada fanático. Supongo que oí demasiadas predicaciones de pequeña, y perdí el gusto por ellas.

—No creo que encuentre que Mardoqueo se entrometa en ninguna predicación —dijo Deronda—. No es lo que yo llamaría un fanático. Para mí un fanático es un hombre cuyo entusiasmo es pequeño y que le han embaucado, de forma que no tiene sentido de las proporciones, y se vuelve injusto y cruel hacia los que no siguen sus huellas. Mardoqueo es un entusiasta; me gustaría reservar esa palabra para las mentalidades más elevadas, aquellas que se preocupan en grado extremo por los grandes beneficios de la humanidad. No es un judío ortodoxo estricto, y permite muchas concesiones para los demás; su conformidad en muchas cosas es una concesión para la condición de otros judíos. La gente con la que vive le quiere de verdad, aunque no puedan entender sus ideas lo más mínimo.

—Oh, bueno, puedo hacer como la madre del prestamista, y gustarme por lo que veo de bueno en él; y donde no veo méritos me fío de su palabra. Según su definición, supongo que uno que idolatrara el sentido común podría considerarse fanático; pues mi pobre marido solía decir que el mundo sería un triste lugar si solo hubiera sentido común en él. Sin embargo, el hermano de Mirah tendrá una buena cama, me he ocupado bien de eso, y taparemos del todo esta ventana para que no entren corrientes de aire. —(La conversación tenía lugar en la residencia de destino)—. Es un consuelo pensar que la gente de la casa no son extraños para mí, no son arpías hipócritas. Y cuando mis hijos lo sepan, podremos hacer que las habitaciones sean mucho más bonitas.

—El siguiente paso es decírselo todo a Mardoqueo, y hacer que se traslade, lo que puede ser un asunto más difícil —dijo Deronda.

—¿Y se lo dirá a Mirah antes de que yo diga nada a mis hijos? —dijo la señora Meyrick. Pero Deronda dudó, y ella prosiguió en un tono de deliberación persuasiva—: No, creo que no. Deje que se lo cuente a Hans y a las chicas la noche anterior, y se marcharán a la mañana siguiente.

—Sí, eso será lo mejor. Pero haga justicia a lo que le he contado sobre Mardoqueo, o Esdras, como supongo que Mirah querrá llamarle; no espante su imaginación haciendo referencias a Habacuc Mucklewrath[239], dijo Deronda sonriendo, pues la señora Meyrick había usado ella misma la comparación de los Covenanters.

—Confíe en mí, confíe en mí —dijo la pequeña madre—. Tendré que esmerarme tanto en conseguir que estén contentos, que me convertiré yo misma. Cuando estoy asustada, encuentro que es una buena cosa tener a alguien enfadado por no ser valiente: calienta la sangre.

Deronda podía haber sido más argumentativo o persuasivo acerca de la opción a considerar sobre el hermano de Mirah, si hubiera estado menos ansiosamente preocupado con la tarea más importante que tenía ante él, de la que quería librarse sin herir a los Cohen. Mardoqueo, con una de sus respuestas memorables, había dejado claro que sería plenamente consciente de cualquier equivocación con respecto a sus sentimientos. Mientras, había estado reuniéndose con Mardoqueo en el *Hand and Banner*, pero ahora, tras la debida reflexión, le escribió para decirle que tenía razones particulares para querer verle en su propia casa a la noche siguiente, y le rogaba sentarse con él en su despacho durante una hora, si los Cohen no lo consideraran como una intrusión. Le llamaría, entendiendo que si hubiera cualquier objeción, Mardoqueo le acompañaría a otro sitio. Deronda esperaba de esta forma crear un poco de expectativas que provocaran un efecto preparatorio.

Fue recibido con la amistad habitual, las mujeres y los niños con algunos vestidos adicionales, y todos los adultos con un ligero aire de sorpresa por el silencio que había mantenido Cohen, pues las transacciones de los invitados con Mardoqueo eran una especie de misterio de las que se sentía orgulloso de pensar que quedaban fuera del alcance de su entendimiento. Pero cuando Deronda dijo: «Supongo que Mardoqueo está en casa esperándome», Jacob, que había sacado sus frutos de las observaciones familiares, se dirigió hacia él y le dijo:

—¿Sobre qué quiere hablar con Mardoqueo?

—Sobre algo que es muy interesante para él —dijo Deronda, pellizcando la oreja del chico—, pero que tú no puedes entender.

—¿Puede usted decir esto? —dijo Jacob, soltando inmediatamente uno de sus versos aprendidos rutinariamente con una mezcla maravillosa de los sonidos guturales y nasales, y asintiendo con su pequeña cabeza hacia su interlocutor, con la sensación de dar una gran evidencia de que podrían intercambiar sus posiciones.

—No, ciertamente —dijo Deronda, manteniéndose serio—. No puedo decir nada parecido.

—Ya pensaba que no —dijo Jacob, bailando una danza de triunfo con sus pequeñas piernas escarlata, mientras se sacaba varios objetos del fondo de los bolsillos de sus *knickerbockers* y se los volvía a meter, como dando a entender cuáles eran sus recursos; tras lo cual, corriendo a la puerta del despacho, la abrió de par en par, y entró diciendo:

—Mardoqueo, aquí está el joven inflado. —Una copia de la frase de su padre, que le pareció muy adecuada como guindilla para su recitación hebrea.

Su madre y su abuela le llamaron acallándole, y Deronda, entrando y cerrando la puerta tras él, vio que habían puesto una alfombra, una silla, y el fuego y las luces estaban encendidas, como signo de consideración de los Cohen. Cuando Mardoqueo se levantó para saludarle, a Deronda le sorprendió el aire de expectación solemne de su rostro, como el que habría cabido esperar si su carta hubiera declarado que le revelaría algo de su hermana perdida. Ninguno de los dos dijo nada, hasta que Deronda, con su habitual ternura, retiró la silla vacante de la chimenea y se sentó al lado de Mardoqueo, quien dijo en un tono de ferviente certidumbre:

—Viene usted a contarme algo que mi alma anhela.

—Es cierto que tengo que contarle algo de mucho peso, algo que confío le alegrará —dijo Deronda, resguardándose de la posibilidad de que Mardoqueo se hubiera estado preparando por algo muy diferente.

—Todo le ha sido revelado, ahora lo ve todo claro —dijo Mardoqueo, más ilusionado, inclinándose hacia delante con las manos unidas—. Es usted el hermano que fue amamantado por mi madre, la herencia es suya, no hay nada que nos divida.

—No he aprendido nada de mí mismo —dijo Deronda. La decepción era inevitable: era mejor no dejar que el sentimiento siguiera expandiéndose en falsas esperanzas.

Mardoqueo se hundió en su silla, incapaz por el momento de prestar atención a lo que se le iba a contar. Todo el día había estado en un estado de tensión hacia la plenitud. La reacción era enfermiza y cerró sus ojos.

—Excepto —Deronda prosiguió amablemente, tras una pausa—, excepto que hace tiempo que he entrado en contacto con otro tipo de conexión oculta con usted, otra diferente de la que me ha contado sobre sus sentimientos.

No abrió los ojos, pero sus labios palpitaron.

—He conocido a alguien en quien usted está interesado.

Mardoqueo abrió sus ojos y los fijó tranquilamente en Deronda: la decepción dolorosa anterior refrenaba cualquier conjetura.

—Una persona muy estrechamente relacionada con su difunta madre —Deronda seguía deseando descubrirle la verdad gradualmente; pero al ver cómo Mardoqueo se encogía, añadió—: a la que tanto ella como usted estimaban por encima de todas las cosas.

Mardoqueo, incorporándose de repente, agarró la muñeca de Deronda; estaba lleno de espanto. Y Deronda lo percibió. Su tono revelaba un claro temor cuando dijo:

—Ha sucedido lo que estuvimos pidiendo en oración: Mirah ha sido librada del maligno.

Mardoqueo le aflojó un poco la muñeca, pero jadeaba con sollozos sin lágrimas.

Deronda continuó:

—Su hermana es digna de la madre que usted honró.

Esperó al decir esto, y Mardoqueo, echándose hacia atrás en su silla, cerró de nuevo los ojos, murmurando cosas inaudibles durante unos minutos en hebreo, y luego acabó rindiéndose a un silencio con aspecto feliz. Deronda, viendo la renovada expresión de su rostro, podía haber imaginado que estaba hablando con algún objeto amado: una nueva dulzura bañaba su semblante, como la que se halla en los rostros de los muertos hermosos. Por primera vez, Deronda pensó que distinguía una semejanza familiar con Mirah.

Luego, cuando Mardoqueo se sintió preparado para escuchar, le contó el resto. Pero al contarle la huida de Mirah pasó tan por encima como pudo la conducta del padre y puso el énfasis en el anhelo que ella tenía de venir a Inglaterra, pues era el sitio donde podría encontrar a su madre. También omitió la intención de Mirah de ahogarse, y su parte en rescatarla, describiendo simplemente la casa que ella había encontrado en la que vivían amigos suyos, y cuyo interés y preocupación por ella había él compartido. En

lo que finalmente se detuvo fue en los sentimientos de Mirah por su madre y su hermano; y con respecto a esto intentó dar los máximos detalles.

—Iba en busca de ellos —dijo Deronda sonriendo—, y por eso entré en esta casa: el nombre Esdras Cohen era entonces el más interesante para mí. Confieso que durante un tiempo temí lo peor. Tal vez me perdonará usted ahora por haberle preguntado sobre la hija de la señora Cohen. Me importaba mucho cómo iban a ser los amigos de Mirah. Pero encontré un hermano digno de ella cuando supe que su Esdras se disfrazaba con el nombre de Mardoqueo.

—Me llamo en verdad Mardoqueo: Esdras Mardoqueo Cohen.

—¿Hay algún parentesco entre esta familia y la suya? —dijo Deronda.

—Solo el parentesco de Israel. Mi alma está ligada a esta gente, que me han acogido y me han prestado su ayuda por el afecto que existe entre los corazones judíos, como el dulce olor de las cosas partidas y escondidas del aire exterior. Es bueno para mí soportar su ignorancia y estar ligado a ellos en gratitud, para que pueda tener siempre en mente la pobreza espiritual de millones de judíos, y no colocar el conocimiento impaciente en el lugar de la sabiduría afectuosa.

—Pero ya no se siente atado a continuar con ellos ahora que tiene un lazo más cercano que le espera —dijo Deronda, no sin temor a encontrar un obstáculo que superar—. Me parece lo correcto, que usted viva con su hermana, ¿no es así?; y le he preparado una casa para llevarle al barrio de sus amigas, para que ella se una allí con usted. Le ruego que me conceda este deseo. Me permitirá estar con usted más a menudo en las horas en las que Mirah se vea obligada a dejarle. Ese es mi motivo egoísta. Pero la razón principal es que Mirah querrá cuidarle, y usted debería darle la seguridad de la presencia de un hermano. Tendrá usted libros. Yo quisiera aprender de usted, y llevarle a ver el río y los árboles. Y tendrá el descanso y la comodidad que cada vez necesita más, o mejor dicho, que yo necesito que usted tenga. Ese es el favor que le pido, ahora que nos hemos encontrado.

Deronda, ajustándose algo nervioso su gabardina, habló en un tono de súplica sincera y afectuosa, como la que habría usado con un hermano mayor venerado. Los ojos de Mardoqueo estaban fijos en él, y permaneció en silencio unos instantes cuando Deronda dejó de hablar. Luego dijo, con un énfasis casi recriminatorio:

—¡Y usted me hizo dudar de que no era judío! ¿No nos hemos tocado mutuamente fibras invisibles desde el principio, no hemos temblado juntos con pasión como las hojas de una misma rama que comparten una raíz

común? Sé lo que soy para el exterior, soy uno de la multitud de los pobres, estoy afligido y moribundo. Pero nuestras almas se conocen. Se contemplaron en silencio como aquellos que se separan por mucho tiempo y luego vuelven a encontrarse, pero cuando se les permitió hablar se hallaron seguras, y cualquier conversación entre ellas es entendimiento. La vida de Israel corre por sus venas.

Deronda estaba sentado muy quieto, pero sentía su cara estremecerse. Era imposible ni negar ni asentir. Esperó, con la esperanza de que Mardoqueo le acabaría dando una respuesta más directa. Y tras una pausa de meditación dijo firmemente:

—Lo que usted quiera de mí, eso haré. Y nuestra madre, ¡que la bendición del Eterno esté con ella en nuestras almas!, también lo habría querido. Aceptaré lo que su afectuosa amabilidad me ha preparado, y la casa de Mirah será la mía. —Hizo una pequeña pausa, y luego añadió en un tono más melancólico—: Pero me dolerá despedirme de estos padres y de sus pequeños. Debe decírselo usted, porque mi corazón no podrá.

—Sabía que querría que se lo dijera. ¿Nos vamos ahora? —dijo Deronda, aliviado por esta complacencia inquebrantable.

—Sí, no lo retrasemos. Hay que hacerlo —dijo Mardoqueo, levantándose con el aire de un hombre que debe afrontar un deber doloroso. Luego añadió, como un pensamiento *a posteriori*—: Pero no haga hincapié en mi hermana más de lo necesario.

Cuando entraron en el recibidor, dijo a Jacob, que estaba alerta:

—Dile a tu padre que venga, y dile a Sara que se haga cargo de la tienda. Mi amigo tiene algo que decir —continuó volviéndose hacia la señora Cohen, la mayor. Parecía parte de la excentricidad de Mardoqueo que llamara su amigo a este caballero; y las dos mujeres trataron de mostrar sus mejores modales al rogar a Deronda con dulce cortesía que se sentara en el mejor puesto.

Cuando Cohen entró con un lápiz en la oreja, se frotó las manos y dijo con gran satisfacción:

—¡Bien, señor! Estoy contento de que nos honre al unirse de nuevo a nuestro grupo familiar. Somos muy acogedores, creo.

Miró a su alrededor con felicidad radiante. Y cuando todos estuvieron sentados cerca del fuego, la escena era digna de verse: en una esquina, el bebé bajo su ropaje escarlata mecida por la joven madre, y Adelaida Rebeca sentada en las rodillas de la abuela; en la otra, Jacob entre las piernas de su

padre; mientras las dos figuras marcadamente diferentes de Deronda y Mardoqueo estaban en medio —Mardoqueo un poco retirado a la sombra, ansioso de ocultar su agitada susceptibilidad a lo que sucedía a su alrededor —. La luz principal provenía del fuego, que mostraba ricos colores en lo profundo de las sombras, y parecía dar voz a las oscuras gemas de ojos que se miraban unos a otros amablemente.

—Acabo de contar a Mardoqueo un suceso que va a producir un gran cambio en su vida —empezó Deronda—, pero espero que estén de acuerdo conmigo en que es un motivo de alegría. Como les considera a ustedes sus mejores amigos, quiere que se lo comunique en su nombre.

—¿Tiene que ver con el dinero, señor? —irrumpió Cohen, con la sensación de que era una pena no expresar lo que ya adivinaba.

—No, no exactamente —dijo Deronda sonriendo—. Pero una pariente muy apreciada desea reunirse con él, una joven hermana pequeña muy buena y encantadora, que cuidará de su comodidad en todos los sentidos.

—¿Casada, señor?

—No, no lo está.

—¿Pero con una renta?

—Con un talento que le asegurará una renta. Ya ha dispuesto de una casa para Mardoqueo.

Nadie dijo nada durante uno o dos momentos antes de que la abuela dijera en un tono de lamento:

—¡Bueno, bueno! Así que nos dejas, Mardoqueo.

—Y para ir a un sitio donde no hay niños como aquí —dijo la madre, captando el lamento.

—¡Ni un Jacob, ni una Adelaida, y ni una Eugenia! —se lamentó de nuevo la abuela.

—Ay, ay, enseñar tanto a Jacob le ha agotado. Ahora tendrá que ir a la escuela. Serán tiempos duros para Jacob —dijo Cohen, con decisión.

Para los oídos atentos de Jacob las palabras de su padre sonaron como una condena, poniendo fin de forma terrible a todo el anuncio que había sido como un canto fúnebre. Su cara había ido adquiriendo un aspecto incrédulo y de pena por la idea de que Mardoqueo se fuera: no podía imaginarse el cambio como algo que fuera a durar mucho; pero ante la mención de «tiempos difíciles para Jacob» ya no contuvo sus sentimientos y prorrumpió en grandes lamentaciones. Adeliada Rebeca siempre lloraba cuando lloraba su hermano, y empezó ahora a dar gemidos de forma sorprendentemente

repentina, tras lo cual el bebé, despertándose, contribuyó con gritos de enojo, y hubo de ser sacado de la cuna. Fue preciso mandar callarlos durante un buen rato, y Mardoqueo, que sentía como se le clavaban los gemidos, extendió los brazos hacia Jacob, quien entre lágrimas y sollozos iba girando la cabeza de un lado a otro para observar lo que sucedía. Su padre, que había estado diciendo: «No te preocupes, viejo; ya te llevaremos a ver a los jinetes» le soltó, y el niño se fue con Mardoqueo, que le agarró, y puso su mejilla en su pequeña nuca sin hablar. Pero Cohen, consciente de que el cabeza de familia debía pedir perdón por tanta debilidad, y que la ocasión requería un discurso, redirigió a Deronda en un tono un poco agudo, poniéndose erguido con una mano en cada rodilla:

—No es que seamos el tipo de gente que envidiemos a los que tienen buena suerte, señor, o a los que vemos que su taza se llena más, como suelo decir. No soy un envidioso, y si alguien le ofreciera una tienda como la mía a Mardoqueo dos puertas más abajo, no haría mala cara por ello. No soy de esos que tienen una pobre opinión de sí mismos y se asustan al ver que los demás consiguen oportunidades. Si no soy más que un desecho, que venga un sabio y me lo diga, pues hasta ahora no lo he oído. Y en cuanto a los negocios, no soy una clase de mercancía que esté en peligro. Si alguien me quita algo, puedo recogerme como un gusano y acostumbrarme a ello. Y aunque, como digo, nos está usted quitando uno de nuestros mejores bienes, en quien estamos muy interesados, no estoy diciendo que no podamos soportarlo, a pesar de que mi madre y mi mujer desearon siempre que Mardoqueo estuviera con nosotros; y un judío no debe ser como un sirviente que trabaja por una recompensa, aunque no tengo nada en contra de las recompensas si puedo obtenerlas. Y en cuanto al gasto extra en la escuela, ni soy pobre ni avaricioso, no me colgaría por seis peniques, ni por media corona. Pero lo cierto es que las mujeres y los niños quieren a Mardoqueo. Puede usted verlo en parte, señor, con sus propios ojos. Un hombre judío está obligado a agradecer a Dios, día tras día, que no ha sido hecho mujer; pero una mujer debe agradecerle que la ha hecho según su voluntad. Y todos sabemos cómo la ha hecho a ella: la mujer de nuestro pueblo es inocente como una niña y con un corazón tierno. La mayoría de sus hijos son corpulentos, como así creo que diría usted que es Addy, y no es blanda, pero su corazón es tierno. Así que debe disculpar a los presentes, señor, por no mostrar contento enseguida. Y en cuanto a esta joven dama (pues por lo que nos ha contado, «joven dama», es el término apropiado). —Cohen puso un

énfasis adicional a su mirada y su tono de voz al decir esto—, estaremos todos contentos por el bien de Mardoqueo dentro de poco, cuando nos demos cuenta de lo sucedido y veamos cómo nos hemos quedado.

Antes de que Deronda pudiera encontrar una respuesta a esta extraña mezcla de discurso, Mardoqueo exclamó:

—¡Amigos, amigos! En cuanto a casa, comida y ropa, no podía haber encontrado nada mejor que lo que me han ofrecido. Han endulzado el bocado con amor; y creía que tendría la satisfacción, incluso en mis últimos meses de escasa energía, de continuar enseñando al chico. Pero ahora me siento como alguien que se ha revestido de su mortaja, y que solía tomar la cama como su tumba, y que ha oído la voz divina ordenándole: «Levántate y sigue adelante; todavía no ha llegado la noche». Pues por ninguna otra luz me habría apartado de la amabilidad de ustedes para acogerme a otra. Pero se nos ha enseñado, como ya saben, que *la recompensa de un deber es el poder cumplir otro*, eso dijo Ben Azai[240]. Ustedes han hecho que su deber con uno de sus hermanos más pobres fuera una alegría tanto para ustedes como para mí; y su recompensa será que no descansarán hasta que disfruten de la alegría de las semillas plantadas. ¿Y no vendrá Jacob a visitarme?

Mardoqueo se había vuelto hacia Deronda, que dijo:

—Seguramente eso puede arreglarse. No está más lejos que Brompton.

Jacob, que se había ido calmando poco a poco por la necesidad de oír lo que se seguía comentando, empezó a ver ahora algo de luz para el futuro, pues la palabra «visita» tenía el fascinante encanto de los pasteles y le recordaba la diversión que suponía ir a ver a su abuelo, el entendido en navajas. De un brinco se apartó de Mardoqueo, y se plantó en medio del grupo con sus manos en los *knickerbockers*.

—Bueno —dijo la abuela, con un suspiro de resignación—, espero que nada te impida conseguir carne *cashrut*[241], Mardoqueo. Pues tendrás que confiar en las personas con quienes vivas.

—Claro, claro, puedes estar segura, madre —dijo Cohen, como si quisiera cortar rápidamente cualquier indagación sobre un tema en el que desconocía la posición del invitado—. Bueno, señor —añadió, volviéndose con una mirada de iluminación divertida—, ¡por fin dejaré de obsesionarme sobre qué hablaba con Mardoqueo! No dejaba de preguntármelo. Sabía que de alguna manera algo había.

—Mardoqueo le explicará tal vez por qué le buscaba —dijo Deronda, pensando que lo mejor era marcharse, y levantándose mientras hablaba.

Acordaron que debía volver de nuevo y que la mudanza final la hiciera al cabo de dos días; pero cuando ya se iba, Mardoqueo le rogó acompañarle hasta el final de la calle, y se arropó con su abrigo y la pipa. Era una noche de marzo, y Deronda no pretendía dejarle ir muy lejos, pero entendía su deseo de salir de la casa con él en silencio comunicativo, tras la emocionante conversación que había llenado la última hora. No hablaron palabra hasta que Deronda propuso que se separaran, y entonces dijo:

—Mirah querrá agradecer a los Cohen su bondad. A usted le gustaría que ella lo hiciera, venir y verlos, ¿verdad?

Mardoqueo no contestó inmediatamente, pero al final dijo:

—No puedo decirlo. Temo que no. Hay una mancha en esa familia, y ver a mi hermana puede abrirles viejas heridas. Hay una hija y hermana que nunca será reestablecida como lo ha sido Mirah. Pero ¿quién conoce los caminos del Señor? Todos nosotros negamos o hacemos cumplir las oraciones de los demás, y los hombres en sus actos inconscientes caminan entre brazos invisibles que los sostienen y entre súplicas hechas en vano. En mis oídos tengo las oraciones de generaciones pasadas y por venir. Mi vida no es nada para mí salvo el comienzo de la plenitud. Y con todo, yo solo soy otro orador, y usted satisfará mis plegarias.

Deronda le estrechó la mano, y se despidieron.

Capítulo 47

> Debes amarle antes de que te parezca
> digno de tu amor.
>
> WORDSWORTH[242]

PODRÍAMOS ESTAR TENTADOS DE ENVIDIAR LA TAREA DE DERONDA, DANDO ROPAS nuevas a Mardoqueo, y disfrutando como si estuviera haciendo el boceto de un cuadro imaginando el efecto de las finas camisas de franela gris y una túnica muy parecida al hábito marrón de un franciscano, con la cabeza y el cuello de Mardoqueo sobre ellas. La mitad de su satisfacción provenía de la sensación de ver al hermano de Mirah a través de sus ojos, y asegurar que ninguna impresión perturbara su alegría ferviente. Y con todo, cuando lo había ya dispuesto todo, le entró la duda de si no la iba a confundir, cambiando el efecto: ¿no era ella capaz como lo había sido él de captar la impresionante distinción de su hermano, tanto más por ese aspecto de pobreza que se hallaba entre los recuerdos de su pasado? Pero los Meyrick podían poner pegas a su excesivo judaísmo; y Deronda vio que le disgustaba el prejuicio contrario de las mentes no bendecidas con esa preciosa intuición, que cubre todos los objetos de una solemnidad parecida a la del brillo del ocaso, que nace de una emoción amorosa reverencial.

Y sus sospechas se habrían confirmado si hubiera oído la conversación en torno a la chimenea de casa de la señora Meyrick esa noche, después de que Mirah se hubiera retirado a su habitación. Hans, que vivía ahora en sus habitaciones de Chelsea, estaba todavía allí, y la señora Meyrick, atizando el fuego, dijo:

—Venga, Kate, apaga tu vela, y venid todos alrededor del fuego, que estaremos más cómodos. Hans, querido, deja de reírte de una vez de esos poemas, y ven también. Tengo algo maravilloso que contaros.

—Como si no lo supiera, mami. Lo he visto en una esquina de tus ojos desde hace tiempo, y en tus recados fingidos —dijo Kate, mientras las chicas se acercaron para poner sus pies en el guardafuego, y Hans, arrastrando su silla cerca de ellas, se sentó a horcajadas con la silla del revés, apoyando los puños y su barbilla en el respaldo.

—Bueno, si eres tan lista, ¡quizás ya sabes que el hermano de Mirah ha sido encontrado! —dijo la señora Meyrick, recalcando las palabras.

—¡Oh, qué demonios! —dijo Hans inmediatamente.

—Hans, eso no está bien —dijo Mab—. Imagina que te hubiéramos perdido a ti.

—Yo no puedo evitar estar triste —dijo Kate—. ¿Y su madre? ¿Dónde está?

—Su madre está muerta.

—Espero que el hermano no sea un hombre malo —dijo Amy.

—Ni un tipo todo sonrisas y lleno de joyas, ni un Crystal Palace asirio con un sombrero —dijo Hans, de mal humor.

—¿Cómo puedo tener unos hijos tan insensibles? —dijo la señora Meyrick, reafirmándose por la necesidad de oponerse—. No pensáis para nada en la alegría que va a suponer para Mirah.

—Ya sabes, mami, que Mirah apenas recuerda a su hermano —dijo Kate.

—La gente que se pierde doce años no debería volver de nuevo —dijo Hans—. Siempre están ahí estorbando.

—¡Hans! —dijo la señora Meyrick a modo de reproche—. Si me hubieras perdido durante *veinte* años, habría pensado…

—He dicho doce años —la interrumpió Hans—. En cualquier caso, doce años es el tiempo en que las relaciones perdidas deberían apartarse de en medio.

—Bueno, pero es bonito encontrar a la gente: hay algo que contar —dijo Mab, dándose una palmada en las rodillas—. ¿Le encontró el príncipe Camaralzamán?

La señora Meyrick les contó todo lo que sabía sin interrupción en su estilo narrativo y ordenado.

—El señor Deronda le tiene en muy alta consideración —concluyó—, parece casi admirarlo. Y dice que Mirah es precisamente la hermana que comprenderá a su hermano.

—Deronda está perdiendo el sentido común con esos judíos —dijo Hans indignado, levantándose y apartando su silla estrepitosamente—. Quiere hacer todo lo que puede para animar a Mirah en sus creencias.

—¡Oh, qué vergüenza, Hans! Hablar así, del señor Deronda —dijo Mab. El rostro de la señora Meyrick mostraba algo de lo que ocurría en su interior, que procuraba reprimir.

—Y ahora no estaremos todos juntos nunca más —continuó Hans, paseando con las manos en los bolsillos de su abrigo de pana oscura—, pero tendremos que invitar a este profeta Elías a tomar té con nosotros, y Mirah no pensará en nada más que sentarse en las ruinas de Jerusalén. Se corromperá como una artista, tened en cuenta esto, se cerrará como una monja. Todo quedará arruinado, nuestra casa y todo. Tendré que volcarme en la bebida.

—Oh, por favor, Hans —dijo Kate, con impaciencia—. Creo que los hombres son los animales más despreciables de toda la creación. O lo tienen todo controlado, o son insoportables.

—¡Oh, oh, oh, es espantoso! —gritó Mab—. Me siento como si la vieja Nínive resurgiera de nuevo.

—Me gustaría saber para qué sirve que hayas ido a la universidad y lo sepas todo, si eres tan infantil, Hans —dijo Amy—. Deberías ser capaz de soportar a un hombre que la Providencia te pone en tu camino para que seas amable con él. Todos tendremos que soportarle.

—En fin, espero que a vosotras os gusten las nuevas Lamentaciones de Jeremías, y que las continuéis en nuestra próxima conversación —dijo Hans, a modo de advertencia—. No sirve de nada apoyar una cosa más que otra si hay que soportar la compañía de los hombres con una idea fija, con la mirada puesta en blanco, y pensando que cualquier observación tuya no es más que una nota a pie de página de su texto. Si os vais a meter en un pozo petrificador[243], mejor sería que fuerais un trasto viejo. Pero yo no me siento como un trasto viejo. —Luego añadió de forma abrupta—: Buenas noches, mamaíta —inclinándose para darle un beso en la frente de forma apresurada, y añadió con condescendencia dirigiéndose a la puerta—: Buenas noches, chicas.

—Imagina que Mirah supiera cómo te comportas —dijo Kate. Pero su respuesta fue un portazo—. Me gustaría ver a Mirah cuando el señor Deronda se lo cuente —le dijo a su madre—. Sé que estará tan hermosa.

Pero Deronda, pensándolo mejor, había escrito una carta, que la señora Meyrick recibió a la mañana siguiente, rogándole que hiciera ella la revelación en lugar de esperarle, sin dar la verdadera razón —que quería evitar entrar en una narrativa en la que pareciera que se hacía el importante, otorgándose un carácter de beneficencia general— sino diciendo que quería permanecer con Mardoqueo mientras la señora Meyrick traería a Mirah, dándole a entender que iban a hacer solo una visita, para que pudiera haber un

pequeño intervalo antes de ese cambio de morada que esperaba que la misma Mirah propusiera.

Deronda sentía en el fondo cierta ansiedad por ver si Mardoqueo, tras años ocupado en ideas que probablemente se habían vuelto más exclusivas con la disminución de su fuerza física, iba a sentir un interés sincero en su hermana por encima del cumplimiento de sus deberes piadosos. Sus sentimientos por los Cohen, y especialmente por el pequeño Jacob, mostraba una persistente actividad afectiva; pero esos sujetos habían entrado en su día cotidiana durante años; y a Deronda le llamaba la atención que Mardoqueo no preguntara nada sobre Mirah, guardando, en verdad, un silencio inusual sobre todos los temas, como si estuviera asumiendo los cambios que se iban a producir en su vida personal. Se puso sus nuevas ropas sin rechistar, pero luego dijo a Deronda, con una débil sonrisa:

—Tengo que quedarme con mis prendas viejas como recuerdo.

Y mientras estuvieron sentados, esperando a Mirah, no pronunció ni una sola palabra, manteniendo los ojos cerrados, pero aún así mostrando inquietud en su rostro y en sus manos. De hecho, Mardoqueo estaba experimentando esa perturbación nerviosa peculiar que solo conocen aquellos cuyas mentes, que habitualmente y desde hace tiempo se mueven con fuerte ímpetu siguiendo una corriente, son de repente empujadas hacia otro canal nuevo. La gente susceptible, cuya fuerza ha sido totalmente absorbida por los prejuicios latentes, teme cualquier entrevista que reviva imperiosamente el pasado, como temería una enfermedad amenazadora. Puede haber alegría, pero la alegría, también, es terrible.

Deronda se contagió de su emoción, y cuando oyó el timbre de la puerta, salió, sin saber exactamente por qué, para ver y saludar a Mirah lo antes posible. Se asustó al ver que llevaba puesto el sombrero y la capa con que la había visto por primera vez —la capa memorable que una vez fue humedecida para convertirse en sudario—. Había bajado las escaleras vestida de esta forma, y cuando la señora Meyrick dijo, en un tono interrogativo: «¿Te gusta ponerte eso, querida?», ella respondió:

—Mi hermano es pobre, y quiero tener en la medida de lo posible el mismo aspecto que tenga él; de otra forma, se sentiría distante de mí —pues se imaginaba encontrarlo vestido con su ropa de trabajo—. Deronda no pudo replicar, pero se sintió interiormente avergonzado de sus maniáticos preparativos. Se estrecharon las manos en silencio, pues Mirah estaba pálida y sobrecogida.

Cuando Deronda le abrió la puerta, Mardoqueo se había levantado, y había vuelto sus ojos hacia ella con una mirada ansiosa. Mirah dio solo dos o tres pasos, y luego se detuvo. Se miraron el uno al otro, sin moverse. No era tanto su presencia la que sentían como la de otro; se estaban reencontrando primero en sus recuerdos, en comparación con los cuales el tacto no era unión. Mirah fue la primera en romper el silencio, sin moverse de dónde estaba.

—Esdras —dijo, exactamente en el mismo tono en que ella había contado cómo le llamaba su madre a él.

Mardoqueo, con un movimiento repentino, avanzó y le puso las manos en sus hombros. Era una cabeza más alta que ella y le miró con ternura mientras decía:

—Esa era la voz de nuestra madre. ¿Recuerdas cómo me llamaba?

—Sí, y cómo tú le contestabas: «¡Madre!». Y yo sabía que la amabas. —Mirah lanzó sus brazos al cuello de su hermano, unió sus manos por detrás de él, y le bajó la cabeza, besándola con fastuosidad infantil. El sombrero de Mirah cayó al suelo y descubrió todos sus rizos.

—¡Ah, la querida cabeza, la querida cabeza! —exclamó Mardoqueo, en voz baja amorosa, llevando su mano delgada cariñosamente a los rizos.

—Estás muy enfermo, Esdras —dijo Mirah, mirándole más detenidamente con tristeza.

—Sí, querida niña, no estaré mucho tiempo contigo en el cuerpo —fue la rápida respuesta.

—Oh, te querré y hablaremos juntos —dijo Mirah, pronunciando con dulzura sus palabras, tan espontáneas como el canto de los pájaros—. Te lo contaré todo, y tú me enseñarás: me enseñarás a ser una buena judía, algo que ella habría querido. Cuando no trabaje siempre estaré contigo. Porque ahora trabajo. Tendremos dinero para poder vivir. Oh, tengo unos amigos tan buenos.

Hasta ahora Mirah había prácticamente olvidado que había más gente a su alrededor, pero al decir esto se volvió con una actitud muy hermosa, manteniendo una de sus manos en el brazo de su hermano mientras miraba a la señora Meyrick y a Deronda. La feliz emoción de la madrecita al ser testigo del encuentro de hermano y hermana le había hecho mirar con otros ojos a Mardoqueo, el cual le parecía tener ciertamente más dignidad y finura que las que había tenido que creer del relato de Deronda.

—¡Mira a esta querida señora! —dijo Mirah—. Yo era una extraña, una pobre vagabunda, y ella creyó en mí, y me ha tratado como a una hija. Por favor, dele la mano a mi hermano —añadió, implorante, tomando la mano de la señora Meyrick y poniéndola en la de Mardoqueo, y presionando luego ambas con la suya y llevándosela a los labios.

—El Bien Eterno ha permanecido con usted —dijo Mardoqueo—. Nos ha ayudado a cumplir la oración de nuestra madre.

—Creo que nosotros nos iremos, ¿os parece? Volveremos luego —dijo Deronda, cogiéndole el brazo amablemente a la señora Meyrick, la cual accedió inmediatamente. Deronda temía que alguien hiciera referencia a los hechos sobre sí mismo que había mantenido en secreto a Mardoqueo, y ya no se sentía inquieto de que los hermanos estuvieran juntos y solos.

Capítulo 48

> Es una tarea dura y mal pagada arreglar todas las cosas de antemano solo por el hecho de nuestra seguridad, como bien lo insinúa Machiavello respecto a César Borgia, el cual, dijo aquel, había previsto todo lo que podía suceder tras la muerte de su padre, y se había resguardado de cualquier posibilidad en contra salvo una: nunca se le había llegado a ocurrir que cuando su padre muriera, él mismo le seguiría en breve.

La importancia de Grandcourt como sujeto de este reino era del tipo pasivo triunfal, que consiste en la herencia de la tierra. Los movimientos políticos y sociales le afligían solo si afectaban a su renta, y su biógrafo más cuidadoso no habría necesitado leer sobre Schleswig-Holstein, la política de Bismarck[244], los sindicatos, el sufragio universal, o incluso el último pánico mercantil. Miraba por encima las columnas de los mejores periódicos que hablaban de estos tópicos, y apenas podía decirse que su visión sobre ellos fuera estrecha, puesto que englobaba a todos los alemanes, a todos los comerciantes, y a todos los votantes responsables de ejercer su derecho con la papeleta incorrecta, bajo el epíteto general de «brutos»; pero no tomaba parte en estas tan agitadas cuestiones más allá de mirar despectivamente a cualquier hombre que se las mencionara, y guardando un silencio que servía para despertar la opinión de los pensadores tímidos.

Pero Grandcourt, dentro de su propia esfera, mostraba alguna de las cualidades que habrían triunfado en la diplomacia más agresiva.

No se le escapaba ninguno de los movimientos de Gwendolen respecto a Deronda. Habría negado estar celoso, ya que los celos habrían implicado dudar de su propio poder para dificultar lo que había decidido en contra. Que su mujer tuviera más inclinación hacia otro hombre de sociedad que hacia sí mismo no le apenaba: lo que necesitaba es que ella fuera tan plenamente consciente como lo habría sido si hubiera estado atada con esposas, que su inclinación no le iba servir para decidir nada que estuviera en contra de su determinación. Aunque su entrada en el matrimonio se hubiera realizado por un capricho vacilante, no tenía ninguna duda sobre la interpretación de la unión. No se había arrepentido de casarse; realmente el matrimonio había traído consigo nuevos objetivos a su vida, nuevos objetos sobre los que imponer su voluntad; y no se había arrepentido de su elección. Su gusto era muy exigente, y Gwendolen lo satisfacía: no habría aceptado a una mujer que

no hubiera elevado su rango al casarse con él; ni a una que no despertara admiración por su semblante y su belleza; ni a una que no tuviera una nariz con la forma correcta; ni a una cuyo lóbulo de la oreja fuera demasiado grande y colorado; ni a una, que aunque su nariz y sus orejas fueran perfectas, fuera al mismo tiempo una boba, incapaz de dar respuestas picantes. Podía parecer que estos requerimientos no fueran muy exigentes para sus refinados contemporáneos, cuya habilidad propia para enamorarse quedaba en el aire por la falta de detalles indispensables; pero pocos serían capaces de estar satisfechos como él de que su mujer tuviera un carácter que le predispusiera a marcharse si quería, y que se hubiera visto obligada a casarse con él por motivos muy diferentes al cariño apasionado. Y es que, ¿por qué les iba a cambiar el matrimonio ese hábito a aquellos que prefieren el mando al amor?

Grandcourt no pensaba haberse equivocado en la elección de la mujer; y habiéndose tomado en serio su papel de marido no iba a permitir que se le tomara el pelo o que diera la impresión de que debía compadecérsele. Esto era lo que sentía, no los celos; aun asi, su comportamiento, en algunos aspectos, era tan parecido al de los que sienten celos como el amarillo es al amarillo, color que sabemos puede provenir de distintas causas.

Había llegado a la ciudad más pronto de lo habitual porque deseaba estar en el lugar para consultas legales referidas a su testamento, a la transferencia de hipotecas, y a la transacción con su tío sobre la sucesión de Diplow, pues el cebo del dinero rápido, habiéndoselo presentado de forma apetitosa y sin importunarle, le había acabado convenciendo. Pero otro de los motivos por los que se hallaba en la ciudad era el presentarse con la hermosa mujer con la que había escogido casarse a pesar de lo que muchos otros habían esperado de él. Es cierto que Grandcourt parecía no importarle contar o no con la admiración de los demás: pero este estado de indiferencia, igual que el deseo, requería al objeto en cuestión, a saber, un mundo de espectadores admiradores o envidiosos: pues si te gusta mantener una mirada de piedra ante personas que te sonríen, las personas deben estar ahí y deben sonreír —una verdad elemental olvidada seguramente por aquellos que se quejan de que la humanidad sea en su totalidad despreciable, pues cualquier otro aspecto de la raza decepciona la voracidad de su desprecio—. Grandcourt, por primera vez en la ciudad con su mujer, disfrutó de su indiferencia en todas las recepciones espléndidas, en los eminentes paseos en caballo y cada vez que podía presentarse con ella en ocasiones distinguidas. Deseaba que la gente la admirara a ella; le gustaba que hubiera «tipos» que estuvieran ansiosos por

hablar con ella y observarla continuamente; incluso no habría dicho nada de una ligera coquetería por parte de ella. Pero lo que no le gustaba era que se acercase a Deronda.

Tras la fiesta musical en casa de Lady Mallinger, en la que Grandcourt había observado la conversación del diván tan atentamente como lo había hecho Hans, era algo característico de él nombrar a Deronda en las invitaciones igual que a los Mallinger, procurando evitar tenazmente que nadie relacionado pudiera pensar que la presencia o ausencia de Deronda le importara lo más mínimo; y no hizo ninguna observación a Gwendolen por su conducta esa noche, no fuera que la expresión de su descontento se notara demasiado para satisfacer su propio orgullo. Pero algunos días después puntualizó, sin que viniera a cuento:

—Nada hace que una mujer sea más desgarbada que ir tras la gente y mostrar su estado de ánimo en público. Una mujer tiene que ser educada. Si no, es intolerable aparecer con ella.

Gwendolen se aplicó el comentario, no sin alarma de parecer desgarbada. Pues también ella, con su desencanto melancólico, prefería que su aversión incluyera admiradores. Pero la sensación de hacer algo que se le podía reprochar intensificaba aún más sus ganas de reunirse con Deronda. La novedad y la emoción de su vida en la ciudad eran como las prisas y el cambio constante de los viajes al extranjero; aunque por dentro se desanimara, había un programa que cumplir, algo que satisfaría a una gran parte de sí misma. Pero como siempre ocurre con un interés profundo, las raras ocasiones en las que pudo intercambiar alguna palabra con Deronda tuvieron un efecto extensivo a su conciencia, magnificando la comunicación entre ellos, y agrandando de esta forma el lugar que ella imaginaba tener en su mente. ¿Cómo podía evitar esto Deronda? Ciertamente no la evitaba a ella; más bien deseaba convencerla por medios indirectos y delicados que su confianza en él no había sido indiscreta puesto que no había disminuido su respeto. Además, a él le gustaba estar cerca de ella, ¿cómo iba a ser de otra forma? Ella era algo más que un problema: era una mujer encantadora, por cuyo modo de pensar y por su destino se había preocupado, y a pesar de que fuera fútil, lo sentía como una responsabilidad, quizás tanto más cuando, pensando en su propio futuro, se veía lejos de esta criatura espléndida y de corazón triste, la cual, porque se hubiera visto obligado él una vez a llamar su atención momentáneamente, como si la hubiera cogido del brazo alarmado

para impedirle que se acercara a un peligro, se había vuelto a él con necesidad persistente y suplicante.

Otro ejemplo en el que Grandcourt veía un sentimiento en Gwendolen que habría querido suprimir sin que pareciera que le importara, era en relación con Mirah. Gwendolen le daba vueltas al proyecto de las lecciones de canto como una especie de obediencia al consejo de Deronda, pero los días se sucedían con la necesidad del tiempo libre propio de las vidas donde no hay trabajo que marque intervalos; y la continua ligadura a la presencia y vigilancia de Deronda parecían rebajar sus esfuerzos al nivel de aburrimiento que expresaba su conducta; su mentalidad negativa se extendía como la niebla, atrapándolo todo a su alrededor y frustrando cualquier relación.

Pero una mañana, cuando estaba desayunando, Gwendolen, en un arranque recurrente de determinación por recuperar su viejo espíritu, dijo, entreteniéndose con sus langostinos sin comerlos:

—Estoy pensando en realizarme mientras estoy en la ciudad y tomar lecciones de canto.

—¿Por qué? —dijo Grandcourt lánguidamente.

—¿Por qué? —repitió Gwendolen, actuando con descaro—; porque no puedo comer *pâté de foie gras* para que me entre sueño, ni puedo fumar, ni puedo ir al club para que me entren ganas de volver de nuevo; me gustaría cansarme de algo. ¿Cuándo sería más conveniente que cuando estás con tus abogados y tu gente para que pudiera tomar lecciones de esa pequeña judía, cuyo canto causa furor?

—Siempre que quieras —dijo Grandcourt, apartando su plato, e inclinándose hacia atrás en su silla mientras la miraba con una expresión de lagarto y jugaba con las orejas del pequeño spaniel en su falda (Gwendolen había aburrido los perros porque meneaban su cola ante él).

Luego dijo, lánguidamente:

—No entiendo por qué una dama debe cantar. Los principiantes hacen el ridículo. Una dama no puede arriesgarse así cuando está en compañía. Y nadie quiere oír berridos en privado.

—Me gusta la franqueza: me parece que ese es el gran encanto de un marido —dijo Gwendolen, con su gesto habitual de elevar el mentón, mientras apartaba los ojos de los suyos, y levantando un langostino ante ella, prefirió mirar los ojos cándidos hervidos que los del lagarto—. Pero —añadió, habiéndose tragado su mortificación—, supongo que no tendrás nada que objetar a que la señorita Lapidoth cante en nuestra fiesta el día cuatro. Pensé

contratarla. Lady Brackenshaw la tuvo, ya sabes; y los Raymond, que son muy especiales con la música. Y el señor Deronda, que es músico él mismo y un crítico de primera mano, dice que nadie canta con tan buen gusto en ninguna sala. Creo que su opinión es toda una autoridad.

Con eso, pretendía arrojarle una piedrecita a su marido.

—Es muy indecente por parte de Deronda que vaya por ahí alabando a esa chica —dijo Grandcourt en un tono de indiferencia.

—¡Indecente! —exclamó Gwendolen, enrojeciendo y mirándole de nuevo, abatida por la sorpresa, e incapaz de pensar en la probable falsedad de la frase: «Ir por ahí alabándola».

—Sí, y especialmente cuando la promociona Lady Mallinger. No tendría que comentar nada de ella. Los hombres ven cuál es la relación que tiene con ella.

—Los hombres que juzgan a los demás por lo que son ellos mismos —dijo Gwendolen, palideciendo tras su enrojecimiento, y terriblemente asustada de sus propias palabras.

—Por supuesto. Y una mujer debería tomar en serio sus críticas, de otra forma está metiéndose donde no la llaman —dijo Grandcourt, consciente de ir oprimiendo a esa blanca criatura—. Supongo que consideras a Deronda un santo.

—¡Oh, no, querido! —dijo Gwendolen, reuniendo desesperadamente su casi milagroso poder de autocontrol, y hablando en un tono alto y duro—. Solo un poco menos que un monstruo.

Ella se levantó, arrastró su silla apartándola apresuradamente, y salió de la habitación con la precaución similar a la de un hombre que teme mostrar que ha bebido más de lo normal. Introdujo la llave por dentro de la puerta de su dormitorio, y permaneció sentada un tiempo con el mismo aspecto pálido y silencioso que cuando abandonó la sala del desayuno. Incluso en los momentos que siguieron la lectura de la carta venenosa apenas había tenido sensaciones más crueles que ahora; pues la emoción estaba en su punto más alto, donde no es distinguible con la sensación. Deronda, al contrario de lo que ella había creído ser, era una imagen que la afectaba como lo habría hecho una aparición horrorosa, de modo muy diferente de cuando se produjo. Se había aferrado a ella como algo doloroso antes de que pudiera considerar si era ficción o verdad; y peor aún que bloquear su poder de resistencia vino la repentina percepción, el darse cuenta de qué pocos eran los motivos de su fe en Deronda —qué poco sabía de su vida, qué infantil se había mostrado ella

en sus confidencias—. Sus reproches y su severidad hacia ella empezaron a parecerle odiosos, igual que toda la poesía y las sublimes doctrinas del mundo, cualesquiera que fueran; y la grave belleza de su rostro le pareció la máscara más desagradable que pudiera ponerse el hombre más común.

Todo esto le pasó por la cabeza con la rapidez de una pesadilla; y el inicio de su resistencia fue muy parecido al de un despertar. De repente, de la sombría mañana gris llegó un rayo de sol, envolviéndola en luz y calor mientras permanecía sentada tan inamovible como una roca. Se movió con delicadeza y miró a su alrededor —había un mundo fuera de esa pesadilla, y el sueño no probaba nada—; se levantó, estirando los brazos y chasqueando los dedos en su actitud habitual cuando buscaba aliviarse de sentimientos opresivos, y caminó por la habitación inundada de luz.

—¡No es cierto! ¿Qué importa si él lo cree o no? —Esto era lo que se repetía, pero no era su fe que volvía; era solo el grito desesperado de la fe, que encontraba el sofoco intolerable. ¿Y cómo podía continuar el día en ese estado? Con una de sus impetuosas alternancias, su imaginación voló a acciones atrevidas por las que se convencería de lo que deseaba: iría a Lady Mallinger y le preguntaría sobre Mirah; escribiría a Deronda y le reprocharía el haberle hecho ver el mundo falso, malvado y sin esperanzas para ella; a él sí que se atrevía a vaciar toda la amarga indignación de su corazón. No; se dirigiría directamente a Mirah. Esto último era decididamente más práctico, y pronto se volvió en algo imperioso. No importaban las consecuencias. Tenía el pretexto de pedir a Mirah que cantase en su fiesta del día cuatro. ¿Qué iba a decir además? ¿Cómo quedarse satisfecha? No lo podía prever, ni podía esperarse a preverlo. Si esa idea que la estaba volviendo loca era algo real, habría preferido reprimirla sin querer prever las consecuencias. Tocó su timbre y preguntó si el señor Grandcourt se había ido: al hallar que así era, pidió su carruaje, y comenzó a vestirse para salir; luego bajó, y estuvo dando vueltas por el gran salón como una boba criatura prisionera, sin reconocerse en los grandes espejos, ni notando ninguno de los objetos que había a su alrededor en la prisión pintada de dorado. Su marido descubriría probablemente dónde había estado, y la castigaría de una forma u otra, pero no le importaba, no podía desear ni temer nada más que la seguridad de que no había sido defraudada en su confianza.

Averiguó la dirección de Mirah. Pronto estaba en camino con todo el equipaje necesario para llevar consigo su pobre corazón inquieto, cuyas palpitaciones dependían de la respuesta a una pregunta que no sabía cómo

formular. Estaba tan distraída de lo que pasaba antes de ver que la señorita Lapidoth estaba en casa, como lo puede estar alguien que ni se fija en las antesalas o en los pasillos en su camino al tribunal de justicia, abstraída de todo hasta que estuvo en una sala con puertas plegables, y oyó la voz de Deronda detrás de ella. Sin duda un presentimiento la ayudó a identificarla como suya, pero estaba tan segura como si lo hubiera visto. Estaba asustada de su propia agitación, y comenzó a desabrocharse los guantes para poder abrochárselos de nuevo, mordiéndose los labios haciendo ver que le costaba, cuando la puerta se abrió y Mirah apareció con perfecta tranquilidad y una dulce sonrisa de reconocimiento. La visión de su rostro le alivió, y Gwendolen puedo sonreír en respuesta, mientras le ofrecía la mano en silencio; y cuando se hubo sentado, sin dejar de oír la voz, sintió un reflujo de energía en la sensación confusa que no podía temer a la verdad. Mirah acercó su silla todo lo que pudo, como si presintiera que la conversación iba a ser en voz baja, y miró a su visitante con plácida expectación, mientras Gwendolen comenzó hablando en un tono bajo, con lo que parecía algo de vergüenza:

—Tal vez se sorprenda de verme, tal vez debería haberla escrito, pero quería hacerle una petición particular.

—Estoy contenta de verla en vez de haber recibido una carta —dijo Mirah, sorprendida por la expresión cambiada de la «duquesa Vandyke», como le había enseñado Hans a llamar a Gwendolen. El rico color y la paz de su propio rostro contrastaban fuertemente con la belleza pálida y agitada que se veía bajo el sombrero de plumas.

—Creía —continuó Gwendolen—, al menos esperaba, que no se negaría a cantar en nuestra casa el día cuatro, por la noche, en una fiesta como la de Lady Brackenshaw. Se lo agradecería tanto.

—Me encantará cantar para ustedes. ¿A las diez? —dijo Mirah, a la vez que Gwendolen, en lugar de tranquilizarse, parecía sentirse cada vez más incómoda.

—A las diez, por favor —respondió; luego hizo una pausa, y sintió que no tenía nada más que decir. No podía irse. Era imposible levantarse y decir adiós. La voz de Deronda estaba en sus oídos. Tenía que decirlo, no se le ocurría ninguna otra frase:

—El señor Deronda está en la habitación contigua.

—Sí —dijo Mirah, en su tono anterior—. Está leyendo hebreo con mi hermano.

—¿Tiene usted un hermano? —dijo Gwendolen, que había oído esto de Lady Mallinger, pero no le había dado entonces importancia.

—Sí, un hermano querido enfermo de tuberculosis, y el señor Deronda es su mejor amigo, como lo ha sido para mí —dijo Mirah, impulsada por la motivación de no mostrar indiferencia hacia una persona magnífica.

—Dígame —dijo Gwendolen, poniendo su mano en la de Mirah, y hablando casi en un susurro—, dígame… dígame la verdad. Está usted segura de que es bastante bueno. No conoce que haya hecho nada malo. Y lo que la gente dice mal de él es falso.

¿Podía haberse comportado esta mujer de espíritu orgulloso más como una niña? Pero las extrañas palabras no penetraron en Mirah más que con una sensación de solemnidad e indignación. Con un brillo repentino en sus ojos y un temblor en su voz, dijo:

—¿Quiénes son las personas que hablan mal de él? No creería nada malo de él, si viniera un ángel y me lo contara. Me encontró cuando era tan desdichada… yo iba a ahogarme; parecía tan pobre y abandonada; desde el otro lado, habría usted pensado que era una mendigo. Y me trató como si hubiera sido la hija de un rey. Me llevó con la mejor de las mujeres. Encontró a mi hermano por mí. Y honra a mi hermano, a pesar de ser también pobre, ¡oh!, casi tan pobre como se puede ser. Y mi hermano le honra. Eso no es por decir —aquí el tono de Mirah cambió a uno de énfasis pronunciado, y sacudió su cabeza hacia atrás—: pues mi hermano es muy cultivado e inteligente. Y el señor Deronda dice que hay pocos hombres iguales a él. —Cierto desafío judío había entrado en su gratitud indignada y su ira no podía evitar incluir a Gwendolen, pues parecía haber dudado de la bondad de Deronda.

Pero Gwendolen era como alguien reseco de sed, que se contentaba con beber del agua fresca desparramada. No se daba cuenta que Mirah se había enfadado con ella; no era consciente de nada salvo de la penetrante sensación que Deronda y su vida no tenían que ver con la concepción de su marido más que lo que tenía que ver la mañana en el horizonte con la mañana que se vivía en las calles de la ciudad. Incluso las palabras de Mirah quedaron por debajo de la imprecisión de su alivio. Apenas podía haberlas repetido, o haber dicho cómo había cambiado su estado de ánimo. Apretó la mano de Mirah, y dijo:

—Gracias, gracias —en un susurro apresurado, luego se levantó, y añadió, con la conciencia algo nublada—: Debo irme, la veré el día cuatro… se lo agradezco tanto —inclinándose automáticamente, mientras Mirah, abriéndole

la puerta, quedó sorprendida por lo que parecía una retirada repentina mostrando su fría nobleza.

Gwendolen, ciertamente, no iba a mostrar toda la efusividad de sus sentimientos hacia la persona que la había aliviado. La apasionada necesidad de contradecir la suposición de Grandcourt respecto a Deronda, una necesidad que había embotado su sensibilidad para todo lo demás, tan pronto fue satisfecha quiso marcharse de allí. Comenzó a darse cuenta de que estaba fuera de lugar, y a temer ser vista por Deronda. Y una vez de nuevo en el carro, se imaginó lo que la esperaba en casa. Cuando se detuvo ante la puerta en la plaza Grosvenor, su marido estaba llegando con un puro entre los dedos. Lo tiró al suelo y le dio la mano, y le acompañó escaleras arriba. Ella se dirigió hacia el salón, no fuera que la siguiera acompañando y no le diera la oportunidad de retirarse; luego se sentó con aire cansado, se sacó los guantes, y se frotó la frente con la mano, e intentó no advertir su presencia. Pero él se sentó, también, y no muy lejos, justo en frente, en un lugar en el que no mirarle suponía recalcar el esfuerzo por no hacerlo.

—¿Puedes decirme dónde has estado a estas horas extraordinarias? —dijo Grandcourt.

—Oh, sí; he estado en casa de la señorita Lapidoth, para pedirle que venga y cante para nosotros —dijo Gwendolen, dejando sus guantes en la mesita que había a su lado, y fijando en ellos la mirada.

—¿Y preguntarle sobre su relación con Deronda? —dijo Grandcourt, en un tono de burla lo más cruel posible, que a los oídos de Gwendolen resultó diabólico.

Por primera vez desde que se casaron enrojeció ante él sin intentar evitarlo. Volviendo sus ojos hacia él, dijo, en un tono mordaz:

—Sí, y lo que dijiste es falso, una ruin y malvada falsedad.

—Te lo dijo ella, ¿verdad? —replicó Grandcourt, mofándose aún más claramente.

Gwendolen estaba en silencio. El enojo resuelto que había en ella quedó acallado por la rabia. ¿Qué razones podía dar para demostrarlo? Todas las razones que a ella le parecían tan fuertes y verdaderas, las veía sofocadas y malogradas bajo el peso de su marido. No había ninguna prueba que dar más que su propia impresión, que le parecería a él su propia locura. Giró rápidamente la cabeza para no verle, y dirigió la mirada con enojo hacia el final de la sala: se habría levantado, pero él se hallaba en su camino.

Grandcourt se dio cuenta de su ventaja.

—No tiene ninguna consecuencia si viene a cantar —dijo arrastrando la voz—. Puedes hacerla venir a cantar, si quieres. —Luego, tras una pausa, añadió en su tono más imperioso—: Pero te abstendrás de acercarte a esa casa de nuevo. Como mujer mía, debes aceptar mi palabra de lo que es adecuado para ti. Cuando te comprometiste a ser mi mujer, te comprometiste también a no hacer el ridículo. Has estado haciendo el ridículo esta mañana; y si continuaras como has empezado, empezarían a hablar de ti en los clubs de una forma que no te gustaría. ¿Qué sabes tú del mundo? Te has casado conmigo y debes guiarte por mi opinión.

Cada frase de esa conversación, pronunciada lentamente, tenía un control terrible sobre la naturaleza de Gwendolen. Si esos tonos bajos hubieran salido de un médico diciéndole que tenía los síntomas de una grave enfermedad, y pronosticando su desarrollo, no habría estado más desamparada contra los argumentos que residían en ellas. Pero ahora su marido la permitió marcharse, y nunca más volvió a hacer ninguna referencia a lo que había ocurrido esta mañana. Conocía la fuerza de sus propias palabras. Si hubieran mandado a este hombre de manos blancas y perfil perpendicular a gobernar una colonia difícil, se habría ganado la reputación entre sus contemporáneos. Ciertamente tenía habilidad, habría entendido que era más seguro exterminar que engatusar a los propietarios reemplazados, y no le habría temblado el pulso en asegurarse las cosas por ese camino.

Gwendolen no perdió, a causa de esto, su fe recobrada; más bien al contrario, la mantuvo con una tenacidad más ansiosa, como un protestante de los de antes mantiene escondida su Biblia o un católico su crucifijo, según el lado favorecido por las fuerzas civiles; y era característico de ella que aparte de la impresión ganada respecto a Deronda en esa visita, su imaginación se ocupaba poco en Mirah o en el hermano elogiado. El único resultado que contaba para ella era que Deronda había actuado simplemente como un benefactor generoso, y la frase «leyendo hebreo» pasó rápidamente sobre sus oídos, como una cigüeña extraviada habría hecho su vuelo peculiar sobre el paisaje sin levantar ninguna reflexión sorprendente sobre la historia natural.

Pero el desenlace de esa visita, en lo que se refería a su marido, afectó fuertemente el proceso que solía afligirla, y fue la causa de un cambio externo no observado tal vez por nadie excepto Deronda. A medida que pasaban las semanas y se producían entrevistas pasajeras y ocasionales con ella, Deronda pensó que percibía en ella una intensificación de su dureza superficial y de su

resuelta exhibición, que traicionaban abruptamente su agitación de una forma muy marcada e incómoda para él.

De hecho, ella estaba desarrollando una especie de disciplina para la terquedad que, como una conversión, implica a la mitad de la persona con un esfuerzo terrible, y exaspera la desgana de la otra mitad. Grandcourt tenía un don especial más que un discernimiento para detectar su terquedad, y lo que había ocurrido respecto a Mirah aceleró sus sospechas de que aumentaba en las ocasiones en las que casualmente veía a Deronda: había una «maldita tontería» entre ellos; no se la imaginaba exactamente como coqueteo ni nada por el estilo; pero era una tontería que claramente la mantenía a ella en constante emoción —una acción interior que podía llegar a ser desagradable hacia el exterior—. Es sabido que los maridos de antes han sufrido una devoción amenazadora por parte de sus mujeres, que se presentaba primero de forma confusa como extravagancia, y finalmente como la que se vive en los conventos de monjas. Grandcourt tenía una vaga percepción de los estados de ánimo amenazadores de Gwendolen que por la idea que tenía él del matrimonio requería perentoriamente refrenar. Entre los medios que escogió, uno era peculiar, y lo había calculado con menos habilidad que las amonestaciones que acabamos de oír.

Decidió que ella debía saber el contenido principal del testamento que estaba haciendo, pero no podía comunicárselo él mismo, porque implicaba hablar de su relación con la señora Glasher y sus hijos; y era del todo repugnante para él que hubiera un reconocimiento abierto de esto entre Gwendolen y él. Como todas las naturalezas orgullosas y protegidas, rechazaba ser explícito y dar detalles, incluso sobre cosas triviales, si eran personales: un ayuda de cámara debe mantener una estricta reserva sobre el tema de los zapatos y los calcetines. Y no soportaba la confrontación; solía evitar la colisión tranquilamente, gracias a la presión que ejercía sobre los demás. Pero quería que Gwendolen supiera que antes que él se declarara, sabía perfectamente que ella era consciente de sus relaciones con Lydia; ese conocimiento previo era la excusa para sacar el tema ahora. Algunos hombres en su lugar habrían pensado escribir lo que él quería que ella supiese, en forma de carta. Pero Grandcourt odiaba escribir: incluso escribir una nota le aburría, y estaba acostumbrado a que todos sus escritos los hiciera Lush. Conocemos personas que prefieren renunciar a sus propios intereses inmediatos antes de hacer algo tan desagradable como escribir cartas; y no es probable que estos utilitaristas imperfectos se precipiten sobre un manuscrito

y la sintaxis para tratar un tema difícil que afecte a los sentimientos de otro. A Grandcourt ni siquiera se le ocurrió que podía o debía escribir a Gwendolen la información en cuestión; y el único medio de comunicación que podía usar era Lush, que para él, era un utensilio más como el papel y la pluma. Pero también aquí Grandcourt tenía sus reservas, y no habría pronunciado una sola palabra de queja que animara a Lush a moverle a una compasión desvergonzada sobre un matrimonio que había sido desaconsejado por él. ¿Quién que tiene un confidente se libra de creer muy poco en su agudeza y mucho en su discreción? Grandcourt siempre había permitido que Lush conociera sus asuntos externos indiscriminadamente: irregularidades, deudas, necesidad de dinero rápido; solo le controlaba lo que su confidente podía decirle a él; y se había acostumbrado tanto a esta herramienta humana, que el tenerlo cerca en Londres le hizo recobrar su tranquilidad perdida. Así que Lush conocía el contenido del testamento con más exactitud que el propio testador.

Grandcourt no dudaba que Gwendolen, al ser una mujer que sabía atar cabos, sabía o sospechaba que Lush fuera el urdidor de su entrevista con Lydia, y que esta era la razón por la que su primera solicitud fue su destierro. Pero el acierto de las suposiciones de una mujer en asuntos entremezclados que elevan pasiones varias no queda determinado solamente por su capacidad de deducción; y aquí a Grandcourt le faltaba la manera de pensar que le habría salvado del error, a saber, cierta experiencia de las pasiones mezcladas concernientes. Había adivinado correctamente la mitad del temor de Gwendolen: todo lo relacionado con su orgullo personal, y su percepción de que él pretendía someter su voluntad a la de ella; pero la mitad llena de remordimientos, incluso si hubiera sabido que había roto su promesa, estaba tan lejos de su imaginación como la otra cara de la luna. Lo que creía que ella sentía sobre Lydia era solamente una envidia reprimida, y lo que creía que había escrito Lydia junto con las joyas era que le recordaba que era ella quien las solía llevar y otras impertinencias por el estilo con que se imaginaba se trataban entre sí las mujeres celosas. Tenía la certeza triunfal de que podía agravar la envidia y aun asi reírse por dentro sin exteriorizarlo. Su objetivo era aprovecharse de todo el egoísmo de su mujer y hacerlo suyo, y no pretendía insultarla volviendo a contratar a Lush: tendría que entender que era el único enviado posible. El punto de vista de Grandcourt estaba encerrado en sí mismo, lo que a él le convenía, los demás lo tenían que aceptar. Sin duda la falta de compasión nos condena a una estupidez proporcional. Si dejáramos

suelto a Mefistófeles, y le obligáramos a seguir sus propias maquinaciones, inevitablemente metería constantemente la pata.

Una mañana se dirigió a Gwendolen en su tocador detrás de la sala de estar trasera, con el sombrero y los guantes en la mano, y dijo con su voz arrastrada, con su mejor humor y de la forma más persuasiva, de pie ante ella y observándola sentada con un libro en su falda:

—Ah, Gwendolen, tengo que explicarte unos negocios sobre mis propiedades. Le he pedido a Lush que venga y te los cuente. Él lo sabe todo sobre esas cosas. Yo voy a salir. Él vendrá ahora. Es la única persona que te lo puede explicar. Supongo que no te importará.

—Sabes que sí me importa —dijo Gwendolen, levantándose enfadada—. No le voy a ver. —Hizo el gesto de escaparse por la puerta. Grandcourt estaba delante de ella, de espaldas a la puerta. Estaba preparado para su enfado, y no mostró ninguno por su parte, al decir, con el mismo tipo de tono de protesta que habría usado contra una objeción a salir a comer fuera:

—No vale la pena armar un escándalo. El mundo está lleno de brutos con los que uno tiene a veces que hablar. La gente con un *savoir vivre* no se queja de estas cosas. Tengo negocios que atender. Y no puedes esperar que lo haga gente agradable. Si tomo a mi cargo a Lush, lo que se espera de ti es que lo aceptes como tal. No que me organices un escándalo. No que sacudas la cabeza y te muerdas los labios al hablar de la gente de ese tipo.

Este discurso fue pronunciado con una voz tan arrastrada y con tantas pausas que Gwendolen tuvo tiempo de hacer varias reflexiones y reprimir su resistencia. ¿Qué es lo que tenían que decirle sobre las propiedades? Esta palabra tenía una connotación dominante para ella, primero por su madre, y luego por la señora Glasher y sus hijos. ¿De qué serviría rechazar ver a Lush? ¿Podía pedirle a Grandcourt que se lo contara él mismo? Eso sería intolerable, incluso aunque él quisiese, que estaba claro que no, pues ya había decidido lo contrario. Pero ya no soportaba más la humillación de estar allí de pie prisionera, con su marido cerrándole el paso, y se giró para apoyarse en un armario, a la vez que Grandcourt la siguió.

—Lo he dispuesto todo para que Lush pueda venir ahora, mientras yo estoy fuera —dijo, tras una larga pausa, durante la cual Gwendolen no hizo ningún signo—. ¿Le digo que venga?

Y aún hubo otra pausa antes de que ella dijera:

—Sí —su cara se ladeó y sus ojos miraron al suelo.

—Volveré a tiempo de dar un paseo a caballo, si quieres y estás lista —dijo Grandcourt. No hubo respuesta. «Tiene una rabia desesperada», pensó él. Pero la rabia era silenciosa y, por tanto, no le era desagradable. Seguidamente, él le giró la mejilla y la besó; mientras, ella seguía con los ojos caídos, y no los movió hasta que él estuvo al otro lado de la puerta.

¿Qué iba ella a hacer? Por mucho que buscase en su consciencia, no encontraba ningún pretexto para justificar una querella. La única alusión romántica que había tenido en casarse con este hombre era la de ejercer su poder y usarlo a su antojo. Era él quien la estaba usando a ella a su antojo.

Se sentó esperando que anunciaran a Lush como una especie de operación por la que tenía que pasar. Los hechos que la corroían por dentro la exasperaron aún más cuando se dio cuenta de que él los conocía. Todo formaba parte de ese nuevo juego, en el que la pérdida no era simplemente un *menos*, sino un terrible *más* que nunca había considerado.

Lush no estaba ni encantado del todo ni insatisfecho del todo con su tarea. Grandcourt le había dicho como conclusión:

—No seas más desagradable de lo que ya de por sí te obliga la naturaleza.

—Eso depende —pensó Lush. Pero dijo—: Escribiré un pequeño resumen para que lo lea la señora Grandcourt. —No sugería hacer toda la comunicación por escrito, lo cual era una prueba de que la entrevista no le insatisfacía del todo.

Algo se le dejaba también a él en el testamento, y no tenía razones para estar de mal humor, ni aunque el mal humor hubiera sido normal en él. Estaba perfectamente convencido de que había penetrado en todos los secretos de la situación; pero no se regocijaba diabólicamente en ello. Solo sentía con resentimiento la gratificación de su autoestima por haber adivinado que ese matrimonio no iba a ser tan satisfactorio como había esperado la joven y altiva dama, y como Grandcourt deseaba fingir que era. No tenía un rencor persistente mucho más fuerte del que da el condimento del escándalo ordinario para aquellos que lo repiten y lo exageran por sus conjeturas. Sin ningún tipo de compasión ni buena voluntad, tampoco tenía una malevolencia manifiesta, al estar ocupado principalmente en sus placeres particulares, y no le desagradaba nada más que lo que le dificultaba disfrutar de esos placeres; todo lo demás lo situaba al nivel del último asesinato o de la última *opera buffa*, cosas de las que hablar. No obstante, no le daba igual la perspectiva de ser tratado descortésmente por una mujer hermosa, o el hecho que lo contrarrestaba: el poder que le otorgaba el encargo presente para humillarla.

No pretendía usarlo innecesariamente; pero hay personas que están más dotadas que nosotros y que su simple «¿Cómo estás?» parece sumamente ofensivo.

Para cuando anunciaron al señor Lush, Gwendolen había tomado una decisión amarga, que él no sería testigo de la más mínima traición de sus sentimientos, fuera lo que fuera lo que le tenía que decir. Le invitó a sentarse con una augusta tranquilidad. Después de todo, ¿qué era este hombre para ella? No era en lo más mínimo como su marido. El odio que sentía hacia un hombre grosero y familiar, con manos torpes, quedaba amortiguado por la intensidad con que odiaba a su contraste.

Sostenía un pequeño papel doblado en su mano mientras hablaba.

—Ni que decir tiene que no me habría presentado aquí si el señor Grandcourt no hubiera expresado con tanta insistencia su deseo, como sin duda le habrá ya mencionado a usted.

Por cómo había pronunciado estas frases, podía parecer que se presentaba con gran reverencia, e incluso como pidiendo perdón tímidamente. La intención de Lush no era la contraria, pero para los oídos de Gwendolen había tanta insolencia en sus palabras como en sus ojos prominentes, así como en la familiaridad con la que había pronunciado el pronombre «usted». Debería haberse dirigido a ella como señora Grandcourt. Hizo una ligerísima inclinación de cabeza, y Lush continuó, con cierta torpeza, enredándose en lo que de forma elegante se conoce como tautología.

—El haber gozado de la confianza del señor Grandcourt durante quince años o más, desde que era un joven, de hecho, me otorga una posición peculiar. Puede hablarme de asuntos que no menciona a nadie más; y de hecho, no podía haber encargado este asunto a nadie más. Lo he aceptado por la amistad que le debo. Esta es mi excusa por haber aceptado la tarea, por si hubiera usted preferido a otra persona.

Hizo una pausa, pero ella no hizo ningún gesto, y Lush, viendo que sus excusas no eran aceptadas, abrió el papel doblado, y lo miró vagamente antes de empezar a hablar de nuevo.

—Este documento contiene información sobre el testamento del señor Grandcourt, un resumen de una parte que quiere que usted conozca, si usted accede a hojearlo. Pero hay algo que tengo que decirle a modo de introducción, por lo que espero me perdone, si no es muy desagradable. — Lush se dio cuenta de que estaba comportando mejor de lo que había

esperado, y no era consciente de lo insultante que era su expresión: «no muy desagradable».

—Diga lo que tenga que decir sin excusarse, por favor —dijo Gwendolen, adoptando el aire que habría tenido con un ladrón de perros que viniera a reclamar una recompensa por el perro que había robado.

—Solo debo recordarle algo que ocurrió antes de su compromiso con el señor Grandcourt —dijo Lush, no sin que aumentara su insolencia voluntaria a cambio de su desprecio—. Se reunió usted con una dama en Cardell Chase, si recuerda, que le habló de su posición con respecto al señor Grandcourt. Había niños con ella; uno era un chico muy hermoso.

Los labios de Gwendolen estaban tan pálidos como sus mejillas; su pasión no tenía armas, las palabras no serían más que astillas. El discurso de este hombre era como un cuchillo afilado rasgando su piel: pero incluso su indignación por haber contratado a Lush se mezclaba con otros sentimientos, oscuros y alarmantes como una multitud de fantasmas.

—El señor Grandcourt era consciente de que usted estaba familiarizada con este desafortunado asunto de antemano, y cree que lo correcto es darle a conocer su posición y sus intenciones. Es un asunto de propiedades y perspectivas de futuro; y si usted tuviera alguna objeción, le ruego sea tan amable de mencionármela a mí; es un asunto del que, por supuesto, él prefiere no hablar; y ahora, por favor, lea esto. —Al decir las últimas palabras, Lush se levantó y le ofreció el papel.

Cuando Gwendolen decidió que no traicionaría sus sentimientos en presencia de este hombre, no estaba preparada para escuchar que su marido conocía su consciencia silenciosa, los términos aceptados y no expresados en los que se había casado con él. No se atrevió a levantar la mano para coger el papel, para que no pudiera verse que estaba temblando. Por un momento, Lush lo sostuvo ante ella, y ella sintió que su mirada era ignominiosa, antes de decirle en voz baja pero con arrogancia:

—Déjelo en la mesa. Y váyase a la habitación de al lado, por favor.

Lush obedeció, pensando mientras se acomodaba en una butaca de la habitación trasera: «Mi dama se ha estremecido considerablemente. No sabía cuál sería el precio a pagar por ese artículo de tanta calidad: Henleigh Grandcourt». Pero le parecía que para ser una chica sin dinero había conseguido mucho más de lo que cabía esperar, y que, incomprensiblemente, lo había hecho sabiendo aprovechar sus oportunidades: sus palabras a Lydia

no tenían sentido, y el hecho de haber huido probablemente había sido por su destreza. Había resultado ser un golpe maestro.

Mientras tanto Gwendolen intentaba calmar sus nervios para leer el papel. Tenía que leerlo. Todo su orgullo, luchando por rebelarse, sus sueños de libertad, sus remordimientos, sus temores, todos necesitaban saber lo que contenía el papel. Pero al principio no fue fácil entender el significado de las palabras. Cuando lo logró, averiguó que en caso de no tener hijos fruto de su matrimonio, Grandcourt había convertido al pequeño Henleigh en su heredero; eso era todo lo que le importaba averiguar claramente del documento. La otra declaración, acerca de qué provisiones le quedaban a ella en ese caso, la leyó rápidamente, y obtuvo solamente una percepción confusa de miles de libras y de Gadsmere. Era suficiente. Podía despedir al hombre de la habitación de al lado con la energía desafiante que había recuperado ante la idea que la cuestión de la propiedad y de la herencia la habían preparado para humillarla y esclavizarla.

Colocó el papel entre las hojas de su libro, que tomó entre sus manos, y entró con su actitud más majestuosa en la habitación de al lado; al verla, Lush se levantó inmediatamente, esperando que se acercase. Cuando estuvo a cuatro yardas de él, apenas pasó un instante cuando ella dijo en un tono alto, mientras le barría con la mirada:

—Dígale al señor Grandcourt que ha dispuesto las cosas tal y como yo deseaba —y pasó por su lado sin prisa, y dando tiempo a Lush a observar con admiración su graciosa espalda a la vez que captaba medio divertido sus modales y su impertinencia, cosa que expresó arqueando las cejas y mordiéndose la lengua con los dientes. En realidad, no quería verla tan castigada, y se alegró que ya fuera hora de marcharse e ir al club a desayunar, donde iba a tomar un ensalada de langosta.

¿Qué es lo que esperaba Gwendolen? Cuando su marido volviera la encontraría vestida con su traje de montar, preparada para salir con él. No iba a ponerse histérica de nuevo, ni a retirarse a la cama diciendo que estaba enferma. Esa era la decisión que estaba implícita en sus huesos antes de expresarla en palabras, cuando salió de la habitación, dejando a Lush detrás de ella. Iba a actuar según su mensaje, sin darse tiempo a reflexionar. Tocó el timbre para llamar a su criada, y se cambió y se arregló con el esmero de siempre. Sin duda su marido había querido provocarle un gran efecto: tal vez con el tiempo le haría ver que el efecto producido había sido el contrario al que esperaba; pero por el momento todo lo que podía mostrar era una

satisfacción desafiante en lo que pretendía ser desagradable. Vino como un instinto más que como un pensamiento, el mostrar que cualquier signo que pudiera ser interpretado como un ataque de celos (cuando le acababan de recordar de forma insultante que las condiciones eran lo que ella había aceptado con los ojos abiertos), sería la peor de las humillaciones. Se dijo que ese día no tenía tiempo suficiente para discernir claramente sus acciones futuras; lo único que tenía claro es que haría como su marido: ignorar cualquier motivo de excitación. No solo dio una vuelta a caballo, sino que salió también con él a comer, sin contribuir en nada a alterar su trato mutuo, que nunca era el del intercambio rápido de opiniones; y como nota curiosa, incluso rechazó un pañuelo que le había entregado su criada en el que por error había puesto una colonia que Grandcourt había rechazado alguna vez. A Gwendolen no le habría gustado ser un objeto de disgusto a este marido que odiaba: quería que toda la repulsa la sintiera ella.

Pero postergar las reflexiones de esta manera era como intentar hablar sin oírse. El pensamiento unido a nuestra pasión es tan penetrante como el aire, todo es permeable a él: los saludos, las sonrisas, la conversación, las réplicas ingeniosas, son como panales de abejas a los que el pensamiento acude, sin que se lleve siempre un bocado de miel. Y sin haberse encerrado en soledad, Gwendolen parecía después de nueve o diez horas haber pasado por un laberinto de reflexión, en el que se repetía la misma sucesión de perspectivas, las mismas salidas falsas rechazadas, los mismos estremecimientos ante las necesidades de cada medida. Ya estaba experimentando el duro efecto de sentir que sus acciones habían sido solamente vistas y juzgadas a la luz de sus razones más ruines. Revivió las escenas de su galanteo con la nueva y amarga consciencia de lo que había sido para Grandcourt —con la certeza, ahora que le conocía bien, que él había conseguido un triunfo peculiar al conquistar su repugnancia estúpida, y que desde que se casaron, él había sentido una fría alegría por conocer su secreto más íntimo—. Su imaginación exageraba cada impulso tiránico de que era él capaz. «Insistiré en separarme de él», fue su primera e impulsiva determinación; luego, «le abandonaré tanto si me deja como si no. Si este chico se convierte en su heredero, esa será mi expiación». Pero ni en la oscuridad ni a la luz del día podía imaginarse cómo llevar a cabo esas determinaciones con el coraje de sentirlas soportables. ¿Cómo podía huir de su propia familia, llenarles de aflicción, y convertirse en un objeto de escándalo en la sociedad de la que había salido? ¿Qué futuro le quedaba como señora Grandcourt que regresa a casa de la madre, la cual sería despojada de

nuevo de sus bienes por la ruptura del matrimonio que se había celebrado sobre todo para otorgar una manutención a su madre? Había estado viendo recientemente a su tío y a Anna en Londres, y aunque se había librado de tener que invitarles a la plaza Grosvenor porque querían estar con Rex, que a su vez no se arriesgaba a encontrarse con ella, su visita temporal le ayudó a ver con mayor nitidez qué sería de ella si tomara refugio en su propia familia. ¿Qué podría decir para justificar su huida? Su tío le diría que volviera. Su madre se pondría a llorar. Su tía y Anna la mirarían alarmadas y sorprendidas. Su marido tendría poder para coaccionarla. No tenía nada en contra de él que pudiera usar ante oídos juiciosos o judiciales. ¡E insistir en la separación! Era una combinación de palabras fácil de hacer; pero considerada como acción para ser ejecutada contra Grandcourt, sería tan practicable como estar a punto de ceder y a la vez tener miedo de lo que dirían los demás. ¿Cómo iba a empezar? ¿Qué iba a decir que no fuera una condena de sí misma? «Si voy a ser desgraciada en cualquier caso», era la amarga copla de sus sueños rebeldes, «mejor que escoja la desgracia que solo me afecte a mí». Además, su rectitud le decía una y otra vez que no tenía derecho a quejarse de su contrato, ni a retirarse.

Y siempre, entre las imágenes que la devolvían a la sumisión estaba la de Deronda. La idea de verse separada de su marido, puso a Deronda en un lugar distinto, perturbador y doloroso en su conciencia: instintivamente sentía que la separación sería también de él, y al verse como una mujer solitaria y dudosamente considerada, sintió un rubor inevitable por el recuerdo del comportamiento que había tenido con él. Asociar que Deronda pensara dudosamente de ella era intolerable. ¿Y qué diría si lo supiera todo? Probablemente que tenía que soportar lo que ella misma había decidido, a menos que estuviera segura de que podría llegar a ser una mujer mejor por otro camino. ¿Y en qué tipo de mujer se iba a convertir: solitaria, hastiada de la vida, mirada por los demás con una compasión sospechosa? Incluso aunque fuera un éxito conseguir esa triste libertad. La señora Grandcourt «huyendo» sería una criatura más compadecida que Gwendolen Harleth condenada a enseñar a las hijas del obispo, y a ser vigilada por la señora Mompert.

Vale la pena mencionar un rasgo característico de su conducta. No iba a mirar una segunda vez el papel que le había dado Lush; y antes de llamar a su criada lo encerró en un escritorio móvil que estaba a mano, orgullosamente resuelta a no ceder ante la curiosidad de ver qué le habían asignado en relación con Gadsmere, sintiéndose calificada por su marido y su confidente

con la mezquindad del que acepta el matrimonio y la riqueza a cualquier precio, aunque sea deshonesto y humillante.

Día tras día se repetía el mismo esquema de pensamiento. No sucedió nada que cambiara la situación —ningún elemento nuevo en el boceto—, solo una repetición que lo afianzaba. Las semanas de mayo dieron paso a las de junio, y la señora Grandcourt seguía externamente en el mismo sitio, presentándose como se esperaba de ella en las escenas habituales, con su gracia, belleza y vestimenta habitual; tanto en la iglesia a principio de semana, como toda la escala restante de situaciones sociales, hasta la ópera a finales de semana. Ir a la iglesia no era para ella muy distinto de las otras formas de aparición en sociedad, pues el matrimonio no le había dado instrucciones que la capacitaran para conectar la liturgia y el sermón con aspectos más profundos que no fueran los de las inexplicadas y tal vez inexplicables modas sociales. Mientras un celo loable trabajaba para llevar la luz de la ley espiritual a las callejuelas donde la única ley conocida es la de la policía, la brillante señora Grandcourt, consciente de estar casi a la altura de un rector de categoría y muy por encima de un decano instruido, estaba, en cuanto a la preocupación pastoral y a la compañía religiosa, tan solitaria como un hombre en un faro.

¿Podemos sorprendernos de la sumisión práctica que ocultaba su rebelión edificante? La combinación es bastante común, como sabemos por el número de personas que nos hacen ser conscientes de ello en su propio caso por la declaración incansable y clamorosa de las razones en contra de su sumisión a una situación que, al verla de cerca, descubrimos que es la menos desagradable posible. La pobre Gwendolen tenía demasiado y demasiado poco poder y dignidad para ser en esto excepcional. No hay que asombrarse que Deronda ahora la mirara con dureza, pues había sido ensañado a suprimir los sentimientos.

Por ejemplo: una mañana, montando a caballo en la Andana Carcomida con Grandcourt a su lado, vio en pie al lado de las vías de tren, mirándolos, una mujer de ojos oscuros con una niña pequeña y un niño rubio, que inmediatamente reconoció como a las criaturas de todo el mundo que más daño le hacía mirar. Ella y Grandcourt acaban de aminorar el paso al nivel de paseo; él, estando en el lado exterior, es el que estaba más cerca de la inapropiada visión, y Gwendolen no tenía fuerzas en su ánimo más que para apartar la vista de los ojos oscuros que se clavaron insistentemente en los

suyos y luego en los de Grandcourt, que pasó por su lado con el rostro imperturbable, no dando señales de reconocimiento.

Ella sintió inmediatamente una rabia cada vez más fuerte contra él, mezclada con su propia vergüenza, y las palabras: «Deberías al menos haberla saludado levantándote el sombrero» llegaron impetuosamente hasta sus labios, pero no los traspasaron. Si como marido suyo, en su compañía, escogía ignorar a esas criaturas a las que ella misma había desplazado del lugar que deberían haber ocupado, ¿cómo iba a reprochárselo ella? No tenía palabras.

No era casualidad, sino decisión suya la que había llevado a la señora Glasher y a su hijo allí. Había bajado a la ciudad con el pretexto de hacer unas compras —en realidad le faltaban unos aparatos correctores para sus hijos, y había tenido una entrevista con Lush en la que había aliviado su inquietud presentando todas las posibilidades del lado de su triunfo final—. «Déjela sola, y verá como se disuelve el matrimonio de una forma u otra», había insinuado Lush de varias maneras, «dejando asegurada la sucesión a su hijo». Había tenido también una conversación con Grandcourt, que como siempre, le había dicho que se comporatara como una mujer razonable, y la amenazó con castigarla si le daba problemas; pero, también como solía ser habitual, se había reivindicado como ajeno a cualquier tipo de tacañería, pues el dinero que estaba recibiendo de Sir Hugo por Diplow le animaba al despilfarro. Lydia, alimentando las probabilidades a su favor, devoraba su furia impotente con ese agradable alimento; pero no pudo evitar refrenar su discreción y recompensarse haciendo una aparición tipo Medusa[245] ante Gwendolen, aliviando su reivindicación y sus celos al soltar este veneno, aunque fuera tan fútil como el de una víbora arrojada al otro lado del cerco. Así es que, cada día, tras averiguar gracias a Lush la hora probable de paseo a caballo de Gwendolen, se plantaba en ese lugar, desafiando incluso a Grandcourt. ¿Y por qué no llevar con ella al pequeño Henleigh al parque?

La aparición tipo Medusa fue más efectiva de lo que Lydia pretendía por la reacción que causó en Gwendolen ver a Grandcourt ignorar a esta mujer que una vez fue la persona más cercana en este mundo, al igual que a los hijos que ella le había dado. Y mientras, la oscura sombra lanzada de esta forma sobre el destino de una mujer destituida de su dignidad social, envolvía sus visiones de futuro, pensando que podía tener ella misma igual destino, y que se cumplieran sus miedos. Se estremecía tanto más si pensaba hacer algo. ¿Qué podía aliviarla de este terreno lleno de odio, al que tampoco se atrevía a

abandonar, ni aunque estuviera lloviendo fuego? ¿Qué podía aliviarla sino la muerte? Pero no su propia muerte. Gwendolen no era una mujer que pensase en su muerte como una realidad cercana, ni se imaginaba traspasando la frontera de lo inexperimentado y lo invisible. Parecía más probable que fuera Grandcourt el que muriera, pero no era previsible. El poder que tenía su tiranía parecía un poder propio de vivos, en contra de su deseo de verle muerto. A la vez que pensaba que la muerte de él era la única salida posible para ella, también se daba cuenta de que esa salida no llegaría nunca —la doble salida de verse libre de los reproches de los demás y del yugo que se había atado al cuello. ¡No! Lo veía siempre vivo, y su propia vida dominada por la de él; para su joven experiencia la palabra «siempre» no se extendía más allá que los años inmediatos, que le parecían inconmensurablemente largos para su hastío pasional. El pensamiento de su muerte no persistió: se transformó en una pesadilla terrorífica, viéndose a sí misma con sus dedos estranguladores sobre su cuello vengando ese pensamiento. Las fantasías se sucedían como fantasmas, sin dejarla tranquila en su conciencia y sin que hallaran obstrucción alguna en ella: rayos oscuros haciendo su trabajo de forma invisible a la luz del día.

Solo una noche o dos después de ese encuentro en el Parque, hubo un gran concierto en casa de Klesmer, que vivía más bien de forma ostentosa en una de las casas más grandes del área de Grosvenor, un patrón y un príncipe entre los profesores de música. Gwendolen había esperado con ilusión una ocasión así en la que estaba segura de que se encontraría con Deronda, y había estado pensando cómo plantearle una cuestión, que no incluyera una palabra que le habría fastidiado pronunciar, pero que fuera lo suficientemente explícita para que él la entendiera. La lucha de los sentimientos opuestos no la dejaba que su instinto intuyera que la misma idea de la relación de Deronda con ella iba a desanimarla de dar cualquier paso desesperado hacia la libertad. Estaba muy emocionada esperando que alguna palabra suya le ofreciera una solución. El hecho que su oportunidad de conversación con él tuvieran que ser siempre cogidas al vuelo en la dudosa privacidad de grandes fiestas, provocaba que ella las viviera muchas veces de antemano, imaginando cómo se producirían y qué es lo que ella diría. La irritación era proporcional cuando no se presentaban oportunidades; y esta noche en casa de Klesmer, incluyó a Deronda en su enfado, puesto que parecía estar tan tranquilo como podía y alejado de ella, mientras que ella estaba en peligro de traicionar su impaciencia con cada persona con la que hablaba. Solo se sintió segura

mostrando una fría altivez, que hizo que el señor Vandernoodt comentara que la señora Grandcourt se estaba volviendo la pareja perfecta para su marido. Cuando al fin la suerte de la noche la acercó a Deronda, Sir Hugo y la señora Raymond se hallaban tan cerca que podían oír cada palabra que ella dijera. No importaba: su marido no estaba cerca, y su irritación pasó sin freno a un atrevimiento que restauró la seguridad de su autodominio. Deronda estaba por fin allí, y le obligaría a hacer lo que ella quería. Rápidamente, sin gran esfuerzo, y con un aire casi de reina, mientras permanecía de pie con su encaje blanco y sus complementos verdes, dejó escapar con una especie de permisividad real:

—Me gustaría que viniera a verme mañana entre las cinco y las seis, señor Deronda.

Solo podía dar una respuesta por el momento:

Por supuesto —dijo con un tono de obediencia.

Luego se le ocurrió a Deronda que escribiría una nota excusándose. Siempre había evitado presentarse en casa de los Grandcourt. Pero no quería persuadirse de dar ningún paso que pudiera herirla, y si sus excusas eran tomadas como indiferencia o como afectación de indiferencia, en cualquier caso serían ofensivas. Así que mantuvo su promesa. Gwendolen había declinado a salir a dar un paseo a caballo con el pretexto de no sentirse bien, posponiendo su negación hasta el último momento en el que los caballos estaban a punto de llegar a la puerta —no sin cierta alarma de que su marido dijera que también él se quedaría en casa—. Como casi se había vuelto supersticiosa por su poder de adivinación y sospecha, ya tenía preparado lo que haría en ese caso, a saber: negar que estuviera tan mal. Pero Grandcourt aceptó su excusa sin replicar, y se fue cabalgando.

No obstante, cuando Gwendolen se quedó sola, y hubo dado orden de que solo podía ser admitido el señor Deronda, empezó a alarmarse de lo que había hecho, y a sentir una gran agitación, pensando que pronto aparecería, y que tendría que hablar: no de trivialidades, como si no tuviera motivos serios para pedirle que viniera; y aún así, lo que había estado decidiendo durante horas que iba decirle empezó a aparecerle imposible. Por primera vez, el impulso de acudir a él era refrenado por la timidez, y ahora que era demasiado tarde se estremeció por la posibilidad de que él pudiera pensar que su invitación era indecorosa. Si así era, habría caído muy bajo en su estima. Pero inmediatamente se repuso de este temor intolerable al considerar que se estaba contagiando del modo de pensar de su marido. Que él dijera que estaba

haciendo el ridículo era más bien un motivo por el que ese juicio ni se la había pasado por la cabeza a Deronda. Pero que no podía librarse de esta repentina invasión de reticencia femenina se manifestaba en un tipo de acción que nunca se le había ocurrido antes. En su lucha entre la agitación y el esfuerzo de suprimirla, iba yendo y viniendo por todo el largo de las dos salas de estar, donde al final de una de ellas un gran espejo la reflejaba con su vestido negro, escogido por la mañana temprano pensando casi inconscientemente en estos momentos. Pero sobre el vestido negro, su cabeza sobre el pilar blanco de su cuello mostraba su superioridad. En parte consciente de esto, corrió a su tocador, donde había otro espejo, pero también, arrojado sobre una silla, una larga pieza de encaje negro que cogió al vuelo y anudó sobre la corona de su cabello para ocultar del todo su cuello, y dejar que solo su cara sobresaliera del cuadro negro. Con este aspecto tan manifiestamente despectivo, pensó que sería posible librarse de su nerviosismo, pero el lazo negro no apartó la angustia de sus ojos y de sus labios.

Estaba de pie en medio de la sala cuando anunciaron a Deronda, y mientras él se acercaba, ella percibió que por alguna razón tampoco aparecía como él mismo. No podría haber definido el cambio salvo diciendo que parecía menos feliz que lo habitual, y que parecía costarle cierto esfuerzo comenzar a hablar. Pero la conversación empezó de la manera más suave posible. Ambos dijeron: «¿Cómo está?» bastante secamente; y Gwendolen, en vez de sentarse, se alejó un poco, reposando sus brazos ligeramente en la espalda de una silla alta, mientras Deronda permanecía en su sitio; a ambos les costaba decir algo más, si bien la preocupación de él apenas podía haber estado más lejos de la de Gwendolen. Ella vio naturalmente en su embarazo un reflejo del suyo. Obligada a hablar, descubrió que su preparación en ocultarse y su autodominio no le servían de nada y empezó con torpe timidez:

—Se preguntará por que le rogué que viniera. Quería preguntarle algo. Usted dijo que yo era ignorante. Es cierto. ¿Y qué puedo hacer sino preguntarle?

Y en este momento sentía que era imposible exteriorizar las peguntas que pretendía. Algo nuevo en su comportamiento nervioso alarmó a Deronda, preocupado de que no sucediera una nueva crisis.

—Lo que más lamento es no poder serle apenas de ayuda. —Las palabras y el tono la reanimaron, y continuó con más sensación de libertad, pero sin

decir todavía nada de lo que había pensado, y comenzando a darse prisa, para llegar de alguna forma a las palabras esperadas.

—Quería decirle que siempre he estado pensando en su consejo, ¿pero sirve de algo? No puedo conseguir ser diferente, porque lo que me rodea me genera malos sentimientos, y tengo que continuar, no puedo cambiar nada, no serviría de nada.

Se paró un momento, sabiendo que no encontraba las palabras adecuadas, pero empezó de nuevo apresuradamente:

—Pero si continúo me pondré peor. No quiero ponerme peor. Me gustaría ser lo que usted desea. Hay gente que es buena y disfruta con muchas cosas, sé que la hay. Yo soy una criatura despreciable. Me siento malvada odiando a la gente. He intentado pensar apartarme de todo el mundo. Pero no puedo. Hay tantas cosas que me lo impiden. Usted cree, tal vez, que no me importa. Pero sí me importa. Tengo miedo de todo. Tengo miedo de ser malvada. Dígame lo que puedo hacer.

Se había olvidado de todo salvo de esa imagen de su desgracia desesperada que intentaba hacer ver a Deronda con este discurso a trompicones, deseando comunicar, pero no expresar, toda su necesidad. No había lágrimas en sus ojos, pero brillaban dilatados de irritación; había un sollozo refrenado en su voz cada vez más oculto, hasta convertirse apenas en algo más que un susurro. Se estaba haciendo daño con las joyas que resplandecían bien sujetas en sus dedos al presionarlas contra el corazón.

Lo que tuvo que soportar Deronda en estos momentos lo definió más tarde como horrible. Sentía que no podía solucionar esto con palabras, igual que no podría haber salvado un barco a punto de naufragar, un barco lleno de vidas angustiadas azotadas por la tormenta de la que no podían escapar. ¿Cómo iba a detener el largo proceso de la maldad de esta joven criatura? ¿Cómo cambiarlo con solo una frase? Tenía miedo de su propia voz. Las palabras que acudieron a su mente eran tan débiles que parecían mostrar toda su desesperación, o incluso esa insensibilidad hacia las penalidades de otro que busca en nosotros su alivio. Sentía que estaba encerrando con sus labios una multitud de palabras, como si el dejarlas escapar fuera una violación tremenda ante los misterios de nuestro destino humano. El primer pensamiento principal que le vino era: «Confiéselo todo a su marido; no le oculte nada». Esas palabras le hicieron comprender que tendrían que ir acompañadas de muchas más razones para que Gwendolen las interiorizara, pero antes de

comenzar a decir siquiera esas breves frases, la puerta se abrió y entró el marido.

Grandcourt había salido deliberadamente y había regresado para satisfacer una sospecha. Lo que vio fue la angustia del rostro de Gwendolen enmarcada en negro como el de una monja, y Deronda de pie a tres yardas[246] de ella, con una mirada de pena como la que habría dirigido a un objeto amado que estuviera dando sus últimos suspiros de vida. Sin mostrar sorpresa alguna, Grandcourt hizo una breve inclinación ante Deronda, miró de nuevo a Gwendolen, cruzó la sala, y se sentó tranquilamente a cierta distancia con las piernas cruzadas; luego, sacó su pañuelo y se puso a jugar con él elegantemente.

Gwendolen se estremeció y cambió su actitud al verle, pero no se giró ni se movió de su sitio. No era un momento en que pudiera fingir nada o manifestar su repulsa: la pasión de sus últimas palabras era tan fuerte que todavía estaba en su interior. Lo que más le preocupaba era la sensación desesperada de que su entrevista con Deronda había terminado: había caído una cortina. Pero él, naturalmente, tuvo que mostrar su autodominio por lo delicado de la situación y los problemas que podía suponer para ella haber sido descubierta por su marido en este estado de agitación; y pensando que cualquier intento de fingimiento prolongando su visita como si no pasara nada no haría más que exagerar las posibles conjeturas de Grandcourt, simplemente dijo:

—No me quedaré más tiempo. Adiós.

Le ofreció su mano, y ella le dejó que presionara sus pobres deditos fríos; pero no dijo adiós.

Cuando abandonó la sala, Gwendolen se lanzó a un sofá, con unas expectativas tan pobres como su desespero, las expectativas de que iba ser castigada. Pero Grandcourt no hizo caso: estaba satisfecho de hacerla saber que no le había burlado, y de mantener un silencio que era formidable por su omnisciencia. Él salió por la noche, y la excusa que dio ella de sentirse enferma fue aceptada sin ni siquiera un comentario burlesco.

A la mañana siguiente en el desayuno, él dijo:

—Me voy a dar una vuelta en yate por el Mediterráneo.

—¿Cuándo? —dijo Gwendolen, dándole el corazón un vuelco cargado de esperanza.

—Pasado mañana. El yate está en Marsella. Lush va a venir para prepararlo todo.

—¿Puede venir mi mamá a hacerme compañía, entonces? —dijo Gwendolen, a la que la nueva y repentina posibilidad de paz y afecto la llenó como una explosión de luz matutina.

—No, tú vendrás conmigo.

Capítulo 49

Siempre en su alma
triunfó sobre el resentimiento
la gran justicia de la gratitud. Es la marca
de las naturalezas regias, llenas de vida,
y capaces de la alegría.
Las personas que miradas de cerca no llevan esa chispa
que te muestran cómo se diluye la bondad,
y no valoran la palabra «gracias» son los frailes del mal,
abocados a ser pobres en el amor y en la confianza,
pero que deben seguir mendigando en un mundo que aún conserva
algo de humanidad.

Deronda, al despedirse de Gwendolen, se abstuvo de decir: «No la veré de nuevo en un tiempo: me voy al extranjero», para que Grandcourt no interpretara que a ella le importaría ese hecho.

Se iba, de hecho, bajo unas circunstancias tan trascendentales para él, que cuando decidió cumplir su promesa y visitarla, se hallaba ya bajo la sombra de una emoción solemne que le hizo revivir la experiencia más profunda de su vida.

Sir Hugo le había mandado una nota a su habitación que decía: «Ven inmediatamente. Ha sucedido algo», una preparación que le produjo un alivio cuando, al estudio del baronet, fue recibido con gran cariño, en vez de con la congoja que había imaginado.

—¿No sucede nada que le aflija, señor? —dijo Deronda, en un tono más bien de confianza restaurada que de pregunta, mientras estrechaba la mano que le ofrecía. Había algo raro en la mirada de Sir Hugo, y una emoción refrenada en su voz cuando dijo:

—No, Dan, no. Siéntate. Tengo algo que decirte.

Deronda obedeció, no sin presentir algo. Era muy raro que Sir Hugo mostrara un semblante tan serio.

—No que me aflija, hijo mío, no. Al menos, si no hay nada en ello que te aflija a ti demasiado. Pero yo apenas esperaba que esto, justamente esto, llegase a suceder algún día. Ha habido razones por las que nunca te he preparado para esto. Ha habido razones por las que nunca te he dicho nada

sobre tu parentesco. Pero me he esforzado de todas las maneras posibles que eso no te hiciera daño.

Sir Hugo hizo una pausa, pero Deronda no podía hablar. No podía decir: «Nunca me ha hecho daño eso». Incluso si hubiera sido cierto, no podía confiar en que su voz dijera nada. Nadie más que él podía saber lo trascendental que era este momento en que el secreto iba a ser revelado. Sir Hugo nunca había visto ese rostro en el que se complacía tan pálido —los labios apretados con una mirada tan dolorosa—. Continuó con una ternura más ansiosa, como si hubiera descubierto que podía herirle.

—He actuado obedeciendo los deseos de tu madre. El secreto fue deseo suyo. Pero ahora quiere revelarlo. Desea verte. Voy a poner esta carta en tus manos, y luego podrás leerla. Simplemente te dice lo que ella quiere que hagas, y dónde la encontrarás.

Sir Hugo sostenía una carta escrita en un papel extraño, y Deronda se lo guardó en el bolsillo de su chaqueta, con una sensación de alivio por no tener que leerlo inmediatamente. La emoción del rostro de Daniel había enternecido al baronet, y se agitaba visiblemente. Sir Hugo no sabía qué más decir. Y toda el alma de Deronda fue inundada por una pregunta qué era la más dura en el mundo de pronunciar. Pero no podía retrasarla. Era un momento sagrado. Si lo dejaba pasar, podía ser que no volviera a darse la oportunidad de pronunciar esas palabras y encontrar la respuesta. Durante unos momentos, bajó la vista, y les pareció a ambos que los pensamientos flotaban en el aire entre ellos. Pero al final Deronda miró a Sir Hugo, y dijo, con voz temblorosa y reverencial, temiendo reprocharle indirectamente ese afecto ahogado durante años:

—¿También vive mi padre?

La respuesta vino inmediatamente en un tono bajo y enfático:

—No.

En las emociones entremezcladas que siguieron a esa respuesta era imposible distinguir la alegría del dolor.

Para Sir Hugo también esta entrevista arrojó una nueva luz a su pasado. Tras un silencio, en el que Deronda se sentía como el que abandonaba un credo antes de adherirse a otro, el baronet dijo, en tono de confesión:

—Tal vez me equivoqué, Dan, en emprender lo que hice. Y tal vez le cogí demasiado apego a tenerte todo para mí. Pero si has sufrido algo que hubiera podido evitar, te pido que me perdones.

—El perdón siempre ha estado ahí —dijo Deronda—. La pena principal siempre ha venido por otra persona, alguien a quien nunca conocí, y que voy a conocer ahora. Pero no me ha impedido sentir un afecto por usted que ha significado una gran parte de la vida que recuerdo.

Fue como un impulso que los dos hombres se estrecharan fuertemente la mano en un momento.

FIN DEL TERCER VOLUMEN

Que tu principal terror sea el de tu alma:
allí entre la aglomeración de acelerados deseos
que pisotean a los muertos apoderándose de su botín,
acecha la venganza, sin fundamento, irresistible,
como exhalaciones cargadas de muerte lenta,
y sobre el escuadrón más limpio de recónditas alegrías,
se respira pálida pestilencia.

LIBRO VII

La madre y el hijo

Capítulo 50

> Si algún mortal, nacido demasiado pronto
> fuera dejado en trance —mientras los tiempos
> siguieran corriendo— hasta que llegara
> su verdadero advenimiento; y pudiera entonces registrar
> las palabras que le decían los que le vigilaban mientras dormía,
> entonces podría yo contar más del aliento tan ligero
> que siento sobre mis párpados, y los suaves dedos que
> acarician mi pelo. La juventud es confusa; con todo, nunca
> me sentí tan torpe como cuando al pasar ese espíritu,
> me volví hacia él, apenas consciente, como se vuelve
> una culebra cuando las hadas se cruzan en su sueño.
>
> BROWNING, *Paracelso*[247]

ESTA FUE LA CARTA QUE SIR HUGO PUSO EN MANOS DE DERONDA:

> A MI HIJO; DANIEL DERONDA:
>
> Mi buen amigo que lo es también tuyo, Sir Hugo Mallinger, te habrá dicho que quería verte. Mi salud está resentida, y prefiero no perder tiempo para que te pueda entregar lo que durante mucho tiempo he guardado. Que nada te impida estar en el *Albergo dell'Italia* en Génova el día catorce de este mes. Espérame allí. No estoy segura de cuándo podré hacer el viaje desde La Spezia, donde estaré residiendo. Eso depende de varias cosas. Espérame, soy la Princesa Halm-Eberstein. Lleva contigo el anillo de diamantes que te dio Sir Hugo. Me gustará volver a verlo. Tu madre desconocida,
>
> LEONORA HALM-EBERSTEIN

Esta carta, con su redacción incolora, no dio a Deronda ninguna pista de qué es lo que había reservado para él; pero no podía más que aceptar el mutismo de Sir Hugo, que parecía haber prometido a la madre no hacer ninguna de sus revelaciones; y al descubrir que las conjeturas que durante toda su vida había creído eran equivocadas no pensó ya más en nuevas suposiciones. Deronda no podía evitar que su imaginación volara sobre ciertas posibilidades, pero se negó a considerar cualquiera de ellas como más probable que el resto, para no dejarse influenciar por un deseo o un disgusto, y simplemente prepararse resueltamente a afrontar el hecho con valentía, cualquiera que fuera el resultado.

En este estado no podía haber comunicado a nadie la razón por la ausencia que en algunos hogares estaba obligado a mencionar, y menos que a nadie a Mardoqueo, a quien iba a afectar tanto como a él mismo, solo que de una

forma distinta. Si dijera: «Voy a averiguar la verdad sobre mi nacimiento», las esperanzas de Mardoqueo se dispararían en una peligrosa y dolorosa excitación. Para evitar suposiciones, habló de su viaje como de un deseo de Sir Hugo, y lo expresó con tanta indiferencia como pudo, diciendo que no sabía cuánto iba a durar, pero que tal vez sería muy corto.

—Le pediré al chico, a Jacob, que se quede conmigo —dijo Mardoqueo, consolándose de esta manera, tras observarlo con tristeza.

—Tomaré un coche hasta allí y le pediré a la señora Cohen que le deje venir —dijo Mirah.

—La abuela no te negará nada —dijo Deronda—. Me alegra que se equivocaran un poco como me pasó a mí —añadió, sonriendo a Mardoqueo —. Pensaban que la señora Cohen, la madre, no querría ver a Mirah.

—Subestimé su corazón —dijo Mardoqueo—. Es capaz de alegrarse de la floración de otra planta, aunque la suya propia esté marchita.

—Oh, son personas encantadoras; me da la sensación de que nos pertenezcamos unos a otros —dijo Mirah, con un matiz de alegría en su sonrisa.

—¿Qué habrías sentido si ese Esdras hubiera sido tu hermano? —dijo Deronda, maliciosamente, un poco picado de que se hubiera sentido enseguida tan atraída hacia unas personas que le habían causado tantas eventuales contrariedades por su causa.

Mirah le miró con una ligera sorpresa por unos momentos, y luego dijo:

—No es un mal hombre, creo que nunca ha dejado a nadie desamparado. —Pero al pronunciar las palabras enrojeció profundamente, y mirando tímidamente a Mardoqueo, se volvió para ocuparse de otra cosa. Tenía en la mente a su padre, y este era un tema en el que tanto ella como su hermano tenían una dolorosa conciencia mutua. «¡Si viniera y nos encontrara!» era un pensamiento que a menudo le hacía a Mirah ver la luz del día en la calle tan apagada como un bosque encantado en que cada rincón escondía una aparición imaginaria.

Deronda se dio cuenta de su alusión involuntaria, y entendió el sonrojo. ¿Cómo iba él a tardar en comprender sentimientos que le parecían ahora tan cercanos a los suyos propios? Pues las palabras de la carta de su madre implicaban que su relación filial no iba a estar libre de situaciones dolorosas; de hecho, era algo insólito, pero esa carta que había convertido a su madre en una realidad viva la había alejado de sus afectos. La tierna añoranza por un ser cuya vida podía haber sido terrible por no contar con su cuidado y amor, la

imagen de una madre que no había tenido todo lo que se merecía, fuera por reverencia o por compasión, había estado secretamente presente en él al observar a todas las mujeres con las que había tratado. Pero le parecía ahora que esta imagen de su madre no encajaba en los hechos mejor que sus anteriores suposiciones sobre Sir Hugo. Se sorprendió al descubrir que cuando la misma escritura de esta madre había llegado a él con palabras que encerraban sus sentimientos verdaderos, sus afectos se habían rebajado de repente a un estado de neutralidad. Una figura enmascarada con un discurso enigmático había tirado por tierra la imagen que, a pesar de su incertidumbre, su aferrado pensamiento había modelado gradualmente, haciendo aparecer la ternura y la añoranza. Cuando partió para Génova, el verdadero interés que sentía apenas era hacia su madre sino hacia Mardoqueo y Mirah.

—¡Que Dios te bendiga, Dan! —había dicho Sir Hugo, cuando se estrecharon las manos—. Cualquier cosa que cambie para ti, no puede alterar que yo sea tu amigo más antiguo, y el que más se ha preocupado por ti. No te podría haber querido más si hubieras sido hijo mío; solo me habría complacido más el que hubieras sido el futuro dueño de la Abadía en lugar de mi artificioso sobrino; con ello, te habrías dado cuenta de la necesidad de dedicarte a la política. Sin embargo, las cosas son como son. —Era un movimiento defensivo del baronet mezclar observaciones sin importancia con expresiones de sentimiento sincero.

Cuando Deronda llegó al *Italia* en Génova, no había ninguna Princesa Halm-Eberstein allí; pero al segundo día llegó una carta para él, diciendo que su llegada podía ocurrir en una semana, o podía retrasarse una quincena o más; estaba bajo circunstancias que la impedían fijar su viaje con más precisión, y le imploraba esperarla con paciencia.

Con esta perspectiva indefinida de suspense sobre un tema de importancia tan grave para él, Deronda emprendió la difícil tarea de buscar una diversión en el campo filosófico, como un medio de tranquilizar sus emociones y mantener la paciencia entre tanto aburrimiento. Su visita anterior a la magnífica ciudad había sido solo superficial, y le quedaba mucho por aprender más allá del paseo obligado para los turistas, y pasar las horas más frías vagabundeando por las calles, el muelle y los alrededores; y a menudo cogía un bote para disfrutar de las espléndidas vistas de la ciudad y del puerto desde el mar. Todas las vistas, todos los temas, incluso el encuentro esperado con su madre, encontraban un punto en común en Mardoqueo y Mirah, y en las ideas inmediatamente asociadas a ellos; y entre los pensamientos que más

ocupaban su mente mientras su bote avanzaba descubriendo la vista del gran puerto era la cantidad de judíos españoles expulsados de sus casas hacía siglos, que fueron amontonados en barcos y obligados a desembarcar solo para un breve descanso en este puerto de Génova, y donde sufrieron hambre y plagas; madres moribundas e hijos moribundos en sus pechos, padres e hijos observándose cómo se iban consumiendo, como si hubieran salido de las Torres de Hambre[248] y abandonados ante el sol de mediodía. Inevitablemente, los pensamientos fantasiosos de su posible genealogía se entretejían con recuerdos históricos que habían comenzado a interesarle al descubrir a Mirah, y ahora, bajo la influencia de Mardoqueo, se habían vuelto irresistiblemente dominantes. Habría dejado de pensar en tales cosas si le hubiera sido posible, y nunca hasta ahora había admitido del todo que quisiese verificar la convicción de Mardoqueo: internamente se repetía que no tenía elección, y que desear algo era una locura —o aún más, en cuestión de parentesco, desear algo parecía parte de esa mezquindad que deshonra a la familia: era una deshonra anticipada—. Lo que tenía que hacer era simplemente aceptar los hechos; y no tenía hipótesis sólidas, ahora que estaba seguro de su error sobre Sir Hugo. Le habían ocultado tan bien las cosas que cualquier suposición no era fiable, y el mismo nombre que llevaba podía ser falso. ¿Y si Mardoqueo no estaba en lo cierto —si él, al que llamaban Daniel Deronda, no dependía de los lazos que había remarcado la patética esperanza de su amigo—? No diría que deseaba esto, pero no sabía de qué lado decantarse.

Entre estos pensamientos inoportunos, que procuró resistir como el que intenta resistir cualquier cosa en esa condición desencajada propia del suspense, le sobrevenía continuamente una angustia que no hacía ningún esfuerzo por apartar, acogiéndola melancólicamente, lo que a menudo nos parece la mejor expiación que podemos hacer a alguien a quien no hemos podido ayudar. La ansiedad era por Gwendolen. En los maravillosos entresijos de nuestra naturaleza existe un sentimiento diferente del amor exclusivo y pasional en ciertos hombres y mujeres (ni mucho menos en todos), que sin embargo, no es amistad, ni simplemente una mirada benevolente, sea de admiración o de compasión: un hombre —lo decimos de un hombre porque aquí le sucedía a uno— apenas encuentra una mejor forma de entender este matiz del sentimientos hacia una mujer que con palabras: «La habría amado si…»; el «si» cubría la exageración de ciertos prejuicios, o algunas circunstancias que habían hecho surgir una ley de prohibición interna,

que equilibraba la balanza de las emociones. El «si» en el caso de Deronda comportaba razones de dos tipos: pero aún así nunca se había visto libre a lo largo de sus relaciones con Gwendolen de la consciencia nerviosa que debía ponerse en guardia no solo por ella sino por él mismo: por cierta precipitación en la manifestación de los sentimientos impulsivos; por cierta irrupción ruinosa de lo que no es sino momentáneo en el tesoro escogido y permanente del corazón; por cierto exceso en sus confidencias, que ahora pesaban sobre él como el grito que se aleja de una criatura raptada por algún jinete o por las olas, mientras que su propia fuerza no era más que una fuerte sensación de la debilidad. ¿Cómo podrían ser sus sentimientos por Gwendolen exactamente como sus sentimientos por otras mujeres, y habiendo además una con la que deseaba estar más que con ninguna? Era extraño, pero la imagen se le presentaba en su visión del presente y del futuro; y además de extraño, parecía también triste que sus destinos se hubieran encontrado, el de ella estrechamente personal, y el suyo cargado de sensibilidades trascendentales, tal vez con propósitos duraderos, de la que apenas ella era más consciente de lo que puedan serlo los pájaros que vienen como siempre a por las migajas y no encuentran a los hombres que se las daban. No es que Deronda se imaginase a sí mismo como de una importancia suprema para una mujer; pero las palabras de ella insistiendo «que debía permanecer a su lado, que no debía abandonarla» se le presentaban continuamente con la claridad y la importunidad de sonidos imaginados, como los que había dicho Dante que nos perforaban como flechas cuyas puntas llevan la intensidad de la compasión:

> Lamenti saettaron me diversi
> che di pietà ferrati avean gli strali[249].

Pasaron los días, y el mismo aire de Italia parecía traer la consciencia de que se había declarado la guerra a Austria, y cada día quedaba menos para la batalla decisiva de Sadowa[250]. Mientras tanto, en Génova, cada vez hacía más calor al mediodía, las intersecciones de las calles exteriores estaban más llenas de polvo, las adelfas de las jardineras de las aceras parecían cada vez más como turistas exhaustos, y el dulce atardecer invertía su oficio, mostrando a todos los que durante el día habían estado cobijados, y llenando todos los caminos con alegres sonidos sociales, con el tintineo de las campanas de las mulas y el runruneo de las cuerdas deshilachadas, con pasos ligeros y voces, que si bien no eran pausadas, llevaban consigo el

apresuramiento de la dicha; los cerros que circundaban la ciudad, coronados con fortalezas, y llenos de preciosas viviendas y jardines en sus faldas, parecían también acercarse y compartir la plenitud de la belleza tras la larga siesta, hasta que todos los colores fuertes se disolvían a la luz de la luna, convirtiendo las calles en nuevos espectáculos con sombras, quietas y en movimiento, sobre los escalones de la catedral y las fachadas de los palacios macizos; luego, lentamente, la luna descendía hundiéndose en la profundidad de la noche y el silencio, y solo brillaban las luces portuarias del gran faro en la oscuridad de abajo, y las estrellas relucientes en la oscuridad de arriba. Deronda, en su incertidumbre, observaba estos días rotativos como podría haber observado un reloj maravilloso que diera las horas solemnemente con figuras antiguas avanzando y retrocediendo en monótona procesión, mientras seguía manteniéndose atento a otro tipo de señal que tuviera también su solemnidad. Estaba empezando a enfermar de aburrimiento, y veía que contemplaba todas las actividades con el retraimiento de un prisionero que esperaba su rescate. En sus cartas a Mardoqueo y a Hans, había evitado escribir sobre sí mismo, pero estaba realmente entrando en ese estado en que todos los temas se vuelven personales; y los pocos libros que había traído para refugiarse en el estudio se estaban volviendo ilegibles, pues el punto de vista que le obligaba a tomar la vida era en esos agitados momentos el de la incertidumbre cercana a la decisión.

Muchas noches las pasó observando desde la ventana abierta de su habitación la doble y débilmente penetrante oscuridad del mar y el cielo; a menudo, luchando contra el escepticismo opresivo que representaba su destino particular, con toda la importancia que le permitía dar a Mardoqueo, como si su efecto no durara más que el de un sueño —una serie de cambios que le apasionaban, pero que más allá de su conciencia no eran más que una diferencia imperceptible de cuerpos o sombras—; otras veces, con una reacción de fuerza emotiva que otorgaba incluso a la decepción continua, incluso a la demanda completa de sacrificio, la naturaleza de una energía satisfecha, y extendía sobre su joven futuro, cualquiera que fuese, la atracción del servicio devoto; a veces, con la dulce e irresistible esperanza que las mejores de las posibilidades humanas recaerían en él —la mezcla de un amor personal completo con un gran deber; y otras veces de nuevo con ganas de rebelarse (¿qué criatura humana se escapa de ello?) contra las cosas en general porque son así y no de otra forma, un estado en el que veía como imágenes de lo erróneo en el mundo a Gwendolen y a su ambiguo destino, así

como las cosas que se le habían ocultado, que él sentía como adversidades en su propia vida, y que actuaban ahora bajo la forma de una duda afligida sobre la madre que se había anunciado fríamente y se mantenía todavía a distancia.

Pero al final vino. Una mañana, a la tercera semana que llevaba esperando, hubo un nuevo tipo de golpe en la puerta. Un sirviente vestido de cazador entró y entregó en francés el mensaje oral de que la Princesa Halm-Eberstein había llegado, que iba a descansar durante el día, pero que agradecería que el señor comiera pronto, para estar libre a las siete, hora a la que ella estaría disponible para recibirle.

Capítulo 51

> Sostenía la rueca sentada,
> Erina[251], con su densa cabellera
> y sus ojos profundos y agitados,
> mirando con triste sorpresa
> las visiones que surgían en su destino
> al girar terriblemente el hilo,
> trabajando como un insecto, mientras el tropel
> de dioses y hombres realizaban las hazañas que cantan los poetas.

Cuando Deronda se presentó ante la puerta del apartamento de su madre en el *Italia* sintió como si renaciese su infancia con sus conmociones prematuras. Los dos sirvientes de la antecámara lo miraron fijamente, un poco sorprendidos de que el médico que su señora había pedido para consultar fuera asombrosamente este joven caballero cuya apariencia era tal que si hubiera llevado arrugas en su traje podían haber pasado por adornos de este. Pero Deronda no se dio cuenta de nada hasta que, al abrirse la segunda puerta, se encontró en presencia de una figura que la esperaba de pie en el otro extremo de la gran habitación.

Estaba cubierta, salvo su rostro y parte de sus brazos, con un lazo negro que colgaba suelto desde su pelo blanco y caía por toda la longitud de su esbelta figura. Sus brazos, desnudos hasta los codos, salvo por algunos brazaletes de lujo, los tenía doblados, y su cabeza, tan bien equilibrada, parecía más hermosa de lo que realmente era. Pero Deronda no fue consciente de observarla hasta estar delante de ella, tomando la mano que le ofrecía y llevándosela a los labios. Ella le retuvo la mano y le miró examinándolo; mientras, él solo pensaba que sus ojos eran muy penetrantes y su rostro tan mudable que podría parecer otra persona al momento siguiente. Pues incluso mientras ella le examinaba hizo un movimiento con las cejas y la nariz repleto de tácito lenguaje. Deronda no se atrevía a moverse, no era capaz de concebir qué tipo de manifestaciones requerían sus sentimientos; pero se vio mudando de color como una niña, y aún así, sorprendido por su propia falta de emoción; había vivido muchos encuentros imaginarios con su madre, ¡y parecían todos más reales que este! No podía ni aventurar en qué lengua le iba a hablar. No creía que fuera en inglés. De repente, dejó caer su mano, y puso

sus dos manos en los hombros de él, mientras su semblante adquiría un destello de admiración en el que cada arruga desaparecía y parecía devolverle una juventud restaurada.

—¡Eres una criatura hermosa! —dijo, con voz suave y melodiosa, pronunciando las sílabas con un acento que podría considerarse extranjero pero agradable—. Sabía que lo serías. —Luego le besó en ambas mejillas, y él le devolvió los besos. Pero era algo así como un saludo entre miembros de familias reales.

Hizo una pequeña pausa, mientras las arrugas volvían a su rostro, y añadió en un tono más frío:

—Soy tu madre. Pero es imposible que puedas quererme.

—He pensado en ti más que en cualquier otro ser del mundo —dijo Deronda, al que le temblaba nerviosamente la voz.

—Yo no soy lo que pensabas que era —dijo la madre con decisión, retirando las manos de sus hombros, doblando los brazos como antes, y mirándole como invitándole a observarla. A menudo se había imaginado su rostro como si tuviese una semejanza con el suyo: veía algo de la semejanza ahora, pero entre diferencias más sorprendentes. Era una persona muy remarcable. ¿Qué era lo que daba a su hijo una dolorosa sensación de esquivez? Su belleza desgastada tenía una rareza propia de alguien que no es del todo una madre humana, sino más bien una Melusina[252], con lazos en algún mundo independiente del nuestro.

—Solía pensar que podías estar sufriendo —dijo Deronda, ansioso sobre todo en no herirla—. Deseaba ser un alivio para ti.

—Estoy sufriendo. Pero con un sufrimiento que no puedes consolar —dijo la Princesa, con voz más dura que antes, y dirigiéndose a un sofá en el que había preparados cuidadosamente unos cojines para ella—. Siéntate. —Señaló un sitio cerca de ella; y entonces, entreviendo cierta congoja en el rostro de Deronda, añadió más amable—: No estoy sufriendo en este momento. Estoy relajada ahora. Soy capaz de hablar.

Deronda se sentó y esperó a que dijera algo de nuevo. Le parecía estar ante la presencia de un Destino misterioso más que ante la tan ansiada madre. Comenzaba a observarla con asombro, desde la distancia espiritual a la que lo había lanzado.

—No —empezó—, no te envié para que me consolaras. No podía saber de antemano (tampoco lo sé ahora) lo que sentirás hacia mí. No soy tan estúpida como para creer que me querrás simplemente porque soy tu madre, cuando

nunca me has visto ni sabido nada de mí en toda tu vida. Pero creía que escogí algo mejor para ti que estar conmigo. Creo que no te privé de nada que valiera la pena.

—No puedes hacerme creer que tu afecto no habría valido la pena —dijo Deronda, al ver que ella se detenía como si esperara una respuesta.

—No pretendo hablar mal de mí —dijo la Princesa, con ímpetu orgulloso —, pero no tenía mucho afecto que darte. No quería afecto. Me había empalagado de afecto. Quería vivir mi propia vida, y no complicarme con otras vidas. Te preguntarás lo que era. No era una princesa por entonces. —Se levantó con un movimiento repentino, y permaneció de pie como antes. Deronda se levantó inmediatamente también; se sentía sin aliento.

—No era una princesa ni tenía la vida tranquila que tengo ahora. Era una gran cantante, y actuaba a la vez que cantaba. Todos los que me rodeaban eran pobres. Los hombres me seguían de un país a otro. Vivía miles de vidas en una sola. No quería un hijo.

Había una autodefensa pasional en su voz. Se había desprendido de cualquier precedente. Los precedentes no eran una excusa para ella, y solo podía buscar una justificación en la intensidad de las palabras que encontraba para su experiencia. Parecía haber lanzado las últimas palabras para evitar cualquier posible reproche que hubiera en la mente de su hijo, que tuvo que soportarlas y escucharlas, sujetándose fuertemente el cuello de su gabardina como si consiguiera con él permanecer por encima del agua, y sintiendo como le ardía la sangre de la misma forma que si hubiera observado en su madre un extraño rito religioso por el que sacralizaba el crimen. ¿Qué más tenía que contarle? Continuó con la misma intensidad y una especie de pálida iluminación en su rostro.

—No quería casarme. Me obligaron a casarme con tu padre; me refiero a los deseos y a las órdenes de mi padre; y además, era la mejor forma que tenía de conseguir cierta libertad. Podía gobernar a mi marido, pero no a mi padre. Tenía derecho a ser libre. Tenía derecho a buscar mi libertad de un vínculo que odiaba.

Se sentó de nuevo, mientras movía sus ojos y cerraba sus labios con esa sutileza que indica una interrupción en el discurso. Deronda seguía de pie, y tras uno o dos momentos, ella levantó la vista y le dijo con una súplica menos desafiante:

—Y quería alejarte del vínculo que yo odiaba. ¿Qué podría haber hecho la madre más amorosa? Te libré del vínculo de haber nacido judío.

—Entonces, ¿*soy* judío? —Deronda explotó con una enérgica y profunda voz que hizo encogerse un poco a su madre contra sus cojines—. ¿Mi padre era judío, y tú eres judía?

—Sí, tu padre era mi primo —dijo la madre, observándole con un cambio en su mirada, como si viera algo de lo que pudiera tener miedo.

—Estoy contento de ello —dijo Deronda impetuosamente, refrenando su voz pasional. No podría haber imaginado de antemano cómo llegaría a decir lo que nunca hasta entonces habría admitido. No podía haber soñado que sería una oposición impulsiva a su madre. Se sentía enojado —y no parecía dispuesto a reflexionar y calmarse— contra esta madre que lo había hecho nacer a disgusto, que se había convertido a propósito en una extraña para él, y que —tal vez— se estaba dando a conocer ahora también a disgusto. Esta última sospecha parecía explicar ciertas partes de su discurso.

Pero la madre también se sentía enojada de otra manera, y tampoco parecía dispuesta a calmarse. Su enojo era físicamente visible, y sus ojos parecían más grandes por su pálida emoción cuando dijo violentamente:

—¿Por qué dices que estás contento? Eres un caballero inglés. Te aseguré eso.

—Tú no sabías lo que me asegurabas. ¿Cómo podías escoger el nacimiento adecuado para mí? —dijo Deronda, sentándose de lado de nuevo en su silla, casi inconscientemente, y apoyando el brazo en el respaldo, a la vez que apartaba la vista de su madre.

Estaba encendido con una intolerancia que no parecía propia de él. Pero intentaba dominarse y guardar silencio. Solo el espanto de decir algo demasiado duro que hiciera que luego no quisieran recordar nunca este momento refrenó su ira. Hubo una pausa antes de que su madre volviera a hablar, y cuando lo hizo su voz se tornó más firme y resistente, si bien conservando sus ricos tonos:

—Elegí para ti lo que habría elegido para mí. ¿Cómo iba a saber que tendrías el espíritu de mi padre en ti? ¿Cómo iba a saber que amarías lo que yo odio? Si es que realmente amas ser judío. —Las últimas palabras estaban tan cargadas de amargura que cualquiera que las hubiera oído habría supuesto que había un gran odio entre madre e hijo.

Pero Deronda había recobrado su completo dominio. Pensó con compasión cómo había sido y era la vida para ella, cuyos mejores años ya habían pasado, y quién era esa persona que con tantos signos de sufrimiento, se afanaba en contarle un pasado que no solo era el de él sino también el suyo.

Su pudor habitual por aceptar los hechos como si fueran solo suyos le ayudó también en esta situación. Mientras miraba a su madre en silencio tras sus últimas palabras, su rostro recuperó parte de su calma penetrante; y aún así, este efecto tuvo sobre ella una extraña influencia perturbadora: tenía sus ojos clavados en él con una especie de fascinación, pero no con el reposo propio del encanto materno.

—Perdóname si he hablado con precipitación —dijo con modesta seriedad —. ¿Por qué has decidido revelarme ahora lo que durante tanto tiempo te has esforzado por ocultar? ¿Por qué, dado que parece enojarte que a mí me alegre?

—¡Oh, las razones de nuestros actos! —dijo la Princesa, con un timbre cercano al desprecio sarcástico—. Cuando seas tan mayor como yo, no te parecerá una pregunta tan sencilla: «¿Por qué hiciste esto?». La gente habla de sus motivos de una forma cortante y seca. Se supone que cada mujer tiene los mismos motivos, y si no, es un monstruo. Yo no soy un monstruo, pero siento exactamente lo que otras mujeres sienten, o que dicen sentir, por miedo a que se las considere distintas. Cuando en tu interior me rechazas por haberte alejado de mí, te refieres a que debería decir que sentía por ti lo que otras mujeres dicen sentir por sus hijos. Yo no sentía eso. Me alegraba librarme de ti. Pero busqué tu bienestar y te di la fortuna de tu padre. ¿Parezco estar renegando de todo? Bueno, hay razones. Siento muchas cosas que no puedo comprender. Desde hace un año padezco una enfermedad terminal. Probablemente no viva otro año. No negaré nada que haya hecho. No pretenderé amar lo que no he amado. Pero han empezado a surgir sombras a mi alrededor. Las provoca la enfermedad. Si he agraviado a los muertos, tengo poco tiempo para hacer lo que he dejado pendiente.

Las diversas transiciones de tono con las que pronunció este discurso eran tan perfectas como las que habría hecho la actriz más competente. De hecho, sus palabras formaban parte de lo que podría llamarse como una actuación sincera; la naturaleza de esta mujer era tal que cualquier sentimiento —y tanto más cuando era trágico y real— se convertía inmediatamente en motivo de representación consciente: de la experiencia pasaba enseguida a la actuación, representando sus emociones. En un grado menor no es nada inusual, pero en la Princesa la actuación comportaba una rara perfección de fisionomía, voz y gestos. No sería cierto decir que sentía menos por esta doble consciencia: sentía —es decir, su mente experimentaba— tanto más, pero con una diferencia; cada foco de pena o de placer estaba envuelto en esa atmósfera

profunda de emoción o de intoxicación espiritual que encumbra y a la vez amortece. Pero Deronda no hizo ninguna reflexión de este tipo. Todos sus pensamientos se centraban en lo que decía su madre; sus tonos y su bello rostro calaron en su interior sin que lo notara. Lo que anhelaba con un deseo sobrecogedor era saber todo lo que pudiera contarle del extraño conflicto mental bajo el cual parecía haber venido al mundo: lo que su naturaleza compasiva le hizo pensar era en el sufrimiento y la confesión que destilaban sus últimas palabras, y esto le impidió seguir preguntando, cuando ella paró y se quedó callada, frunciendo el ceño, apartando un poco su rostro, con la mirada fija en algo incorpóreo. Debía esperar a que volviera a hablar. Ella hizo esto con una brusquedad extraña, y luego volvió hacia él de nuevo sus ojos de repente, diciendo rápidamente:

—Sir Hugo me ha escrito mucho sobre ti. Me ha contado que tienes una mente prodigiosa, que lo comprendes todo, sabes más cosas que él con sesenta años. Dices que estás contento de haber nacido judío. No voy a decirte que he cambiado mi opinión sobre ese punto. Tus sentimientos van en contra de los míos. No me agradeces lo que hice. ¿Puedes comprender a tu madre o solo culparla?

—No hay una sola fibra en mí que no intente comprenderte —dijo Deronda, encontrándose con su aguda mirada solemnemente—. Sería una amarga contradicción pensar en culparte. En lo que más he intentado esforzarme durante quince años es en comprender algo a las personas que son distintas a mí.

—En eso no te pareces en nada a tu abuelo —dijo la madre—, a pesar de que tu rostro es un vivo retrato de él. Nunca me comprendió, o si lo hizo solo pensó en conseguir que le obedeciera. Tenía que ser lo que se llama «una mujer judía» so pena de no ser maldecida. Tenía que sentir todo lo que no sentía y creer en todo lo que no creía. Debía sentirme sobrecogida por el trozo de pergamino del *mezuzá*[253]; temer que un trozo de mantequilla no tocara la carne; pensar que es algo hermoso que los hombres lleven atado el *tefilín*[254] y las mujeres no, adorar la sabiduría de tales leyes, por muy tontas que me parecieran. Tenían que gustarme las largas oraciones de la fea sinagoga, y los alaridos, y los cotorreos, y los terribles ayunos, y las fiestas aburridas, y los discursos interminables de mi padre sobre nuestro pueblo, que era un estruendo sin sentido para mis oídos. Tenía que preocuparme para siempre de lo que había sido Israel; y no me importaba en absoluto. Me importaba el ancho mundo, y todo lo que podía hacer en él. Odiaba vivir bajo la sombra del

rigor de mi padre. Las sempiternas enseñanzas «tienes que ser esto», «no puedes ser esto», me presionaban como un marco cerrado que me apretaba cada más a medida que crecía. Quería vivir una vida grande, con libertad para hacer lo que los demás hacían, y ser llevada por la corriente, sin ser obligada a preocuparme de nada. ¡Ah! —al decir esto su tono cambió y se hizo más incisivo y amargo—, estás contento de haber nacido judío. Eso dices. Eso es porque no has sido educado como tal. Esa separación te parece dulce porque te he librado de ella.

—Cuando tomaste esa decisión, ¿tu intención era que nunca conociera mis orígenes? —dijo Deronda impulsivamente—. Al menos en ese sentido has cambiado de parecer.

—Sí, esa era mi intención. Me esforcé bien en ello. Y no es cierto decir que he cambiado. Las cosas me han cambiado a mi pesar. Todavía soy la misma Leonora —se señaló con su índice al pecho—, aquí dentro hay los mismos deseos, la misma voluntad, la misma elección —abrió sus manos con las palmas hacia arriba una a cada lado, mientras se detuvo apretando amargamente los labios, y luego dejó que su voz prosiguiera con rapidez y ensordecida—: pero los acontecimientos nos sobrevienen como encantamientos malignos: y los pensamientos, sentimientos, apariciones en la oscuridad son acontecimientos, ¿verdad? No los apruebo. Solo aprobamos lo que amamos. Yo obedezco a algo tiránico —estiró de nuevo sus manos—, estoy obligada a permanecer marchita, a sentir dolor, a morir poco a poco. ¿Eso es lo que debo amar? Bueno, me he visto obligada a obedecer a mi difunto padre. Me he visto obligada a decirte que eras judío, y a entregarte lo que me mandó entregarte.

—Te suplico que me cuentes qué te movió (cuando eras joven, me refiero) a tomar el camino que tomaste —dijo Deronda, intentando con esta referencia al pasado escapar de lo que para él era el desgarrador punto central de esta mezcla de sufrimiento y desafío—. Deduzco que mi abuelo se oponía a tu inclinación a ser una artista. A pesar de que mi propia experiencia ha sido bastante diferente, entiendo el dolor de tu lucha. Me puedo hacer una idea de la dificultad de una renuncia forzada.

—No —dijo la Princesa, sacudiendo la cabeza y doblando los brazos con aire de decisión—. Tú no eres una mujer. Puedes intentarlo, pero nunca serás capaz de imaginar qué es tener el genio de la fuerza de un hombre, y aún así sufrir la esclavitud de ser una niña. Tener un modelo dibujado: «Esta es la mujer judía; esto es lo que tienes que ser; para esto es para lo que te quieren;

el corazón de una mujer tiene que ser de tal tamaño y no mayor, si no, lo tendrán que oprimir, como los pies a los chinos; hay que construir felicidad como se hacen los pasteles, con una recete fija». Eso es lo que quería mi padre. Deseaba que hubiera sido un hijo; se preocupaba de mí solo como si hubiera sido un vínculo improvisado. Su corazón estaba puesto en su judaísmo. Odiaba que el mundo cristiano pensara en las mujeres judías como una especie de mercancía para hacer cantantes o actrices públicas. ¡Como si no fuéramos más envidiables por eso! Es una oportunidad de escapar de las ataduras.

—¿Era mi abuelo un hombre instruido? —dijo Deronda, ansioso por saber detalles que temía que su madre no les diera importancia.

Ella respondió con impaciencia, levantando la mano:

—Oh, sí, y un médico inteligente, y bueno; no niego que fuera bueno. Un hombre que habría sido admirado en el teatro: grande, con una voluntad férrea. Como el viejo Foscari[255] antes de otorgar el perdón. Pero hombres así convierten a sus mujeres y a sus hijas en esclavas. Dominarían el mundo si pudieran; pero al no hacerlo, descargan todo el peso de su voluntad sobre el cuello y las almas de las mujeres. Pero la naturaleza a veces les frustra sus planes. Mi padre no tuvo otro hijo que su hija, y ella era como él.

Había doblado los brazos de nuevo, y miraba como si estuviera preparada para encarar otro intento inminente de dominio.

—Tu padre era diferente. No se parecía en nada a mí: era todo afectuosidad y cariño. Sabía que podría dominarlo; y le hice prometerme secretamente, antes de casarnos, que no pondría impedimento alguno en mi camino de convertirme en artista. Mi padre estaba en el lecho de muerte cuando nos casamos; desde el principio se le metió en la cabeza que me casara con mi primo Efraín. Y cuando la voluntad de una mujer es tan fuerte como la del hombre que la quiere gobernar, la mitad de su fuerza la debe invertir en el disimulo. Pretendía salirme con la mía al final, pero solo podía conseguirlo si aparentaba obedecer. Tenía un temor reverencial hacia mi padre, siempre lo tuve: era imposible evitarlo. Odiaba sentirme tan asustada, habría preferido desafiarle abiertamente; pero nunca podía. Era porque no me lo podía imaginar: no me veía desafiando a mi padre abiertamente y venciéndole. Y jamás me arriesgué a fracasar. —Pronunció esta última frase con un énfasis brusco, e hizo luego una pausa como si las palabras hubieran evocado una multitud de recuerdos que le impidieran hablar. Su hijo le escuchaba con sentimientos cada vez más mezclados: la primera sensación de

ser rechazado por la franca frialdad que había reemplazado todas sus ideas preconcebidas de la tierna alegría de una madre al verle, los primeros impulsos de indignación por haber herido sus emociones y principios más queridos, todos estos elementos que concurrían entre sí fueron menguando poco a poco, y dejando cada vez más espacio para ese esfuerzo por la concesión y esa admiración por su naturaleza contundente, cuyos errores se encontraban en altos senderos, y que él habría sentido si, en lugar de ser su madre, ella hubiera sido una desconocida que apelara a su compasión. Con todo, era imposible desapasionarse: temía que la siguiente cosa que le dijera no fuera aún más repugnante de lo que le había dicho hasta ahora: le asustaba esa extraña coacción bajo la que parecía sentirse y que le impulsaba a vaciar su mente; casi deseaba decirle: «Cuéntame solo lo necesario», y a continuación sentía de nuevo la fascinación que le provocaba observarla y escucharla ansiosamente. Intentó hacerla volver a los detalles preguntando:

—¿Dónde estaba la casa de mi abuelo?

—Aquí en Génova, donde me casé; y su familia llevaba viviendo aquí muchas generaciones. Pero mi padre había estado en varios países.

—Has debido vivir en Inglaterra seguramente.

—Mi madre era inglesa, una judía de descendencia portuguesa. Mi padre se casó con ella en Inglaterra. Ciertas circunstancias de ese matrimonio hicieron que mi vida fuese diferente: por culpa de ese matrimonio mi padre fracasó en sus planes. La hermana de mi madre era cantante, y poco después se casó con el socio inglés de un mercader inmobiliario de Génova, y vinieron a vivir aquí once años. Mi madre murió cuando yo tenía ocho años, y mi padre me permitió estar continuamente con mi tía Leonora y ser enseñada por ella, como si no hubiera recabado en el peligro de que alentara mi deseo de ser cantante, como lo había sido ella. Pero así era, vi esta actitud en mi padre una y otra vez: no intentaba prevenir las consecuencias, porque estaba seguro que las podía evitar si quería. Antes de que mi tía se fuera de Génova, había aprendido lo suficiente para destapar la cantante y actriz que había en mí: mi padre no sabía todo lo que había hecho; pero sabía que me habían enseñado música y canto, conocía mi tendencia. Pero le daba igual: yo iba a cumplir su voluntad. Y había decidido que debía casarme con mi primo Efraín, él único miembro de la familia de mi padre que quedaba y que conocía. Yo no quería casarme. Pensé todas las estratagemas posibles para resistir, pero al final me di cuenta de que podía dominar a mi primo y acepté. Mi padre murió tres semanas después de que nos casáramos, y desde entonces, ¡pude hacer lo que

quise! —Pronunció estas palabras casi con alegría; pero tras una pequeña pausa su rostro cambió, y dijo en un tono amago—: Pero no duró mucho. Mi padre se las está apañando para conseguir lo que quería.

Contempló más detenidamente a su hijo, y al final dijo:

—Tú eres como él pero más dulce, hay algo de tu propio padre en ti; e hizo que la labor de su vida fuera dedicarse a mí: liquidó su dinero, cambiándolo e invirtiéndolo, y vivió esperando a que le amara; renunció incluso a su conciencia por mí. Así como yo amaba el arte, él me amaba a mí. Déjame mirar tu mano otra vez: la mano del anillo. Era el anillo de tu padre.

Acercó su silla a ella y le tendió la mano. Sabemos qué tipo de mano era: la de ella, mucho más pequeña, era del mismo tipo. Cuando sintió su pequeña mano sosteniendo la suya, cuando vio más de cerca el rostro que se asemejaba al suyo, ajado no por el tiempo sino por la intensidad, la fuerte inclinación de su naturaleza hacia una ternura reverencial despuntó sobre cualquier otra impresión, y en su tono más ferviente dijo:

—¡Madre! Acéptalos a todos en tu corazón: a los vivos y a los muertos. Perdona todo lo que te hizo daño en el pasado. Y acepta mi afecto.

Ella le miró con admiración más que con amor, luego le besó en la frente y le dijo tristemente:

—No rechazo nada, pero yo no tengo nada que ofrecer —le soltó la mano y se hundió hacia atrás en sus cojines. Deronda palideció más por la sensación que por la emoción: la pena de la ternura rechazada. Ella notó la expresión de dolor, y dijo, todavía con una melancolía melodiosa en su tono:

—Es mejor así. Debemos separarnos de nuevo pronto y tú no me debes nada. Yo no quería que nacieras. Me separé de ti voluntariamente. Cuando tu padre murió decidí que no me ataría nada, salvo a aquello de lo que pudiera librarme yo misma. Yo era la Alcharisi de la que has oído hablar: el nombre tenía magia allí donde llegaba. Los hombres me cortejaban. Sir Hugo Mallinger era uno de los que querían casarse conmigo. Estaba locamente enamorado de mí. Un día le pregunté: «¿Hay algún hombre capaz de hacer algo por amor a mí, y que no espere nada a cambio?». Me respondió: «¿Qué es lo que quieres que haga?». Yo le dije: «Coge a mi niño y edúcalo como inglés, y no le permitas nunca saber nada acerca de sus padres». Tenías poco más de dos años, y estabas sentado a sus pies. Él declaró que pagaría dinero por tener a ese niño. Yo no había meditado mucho sobre ese plan anteriormente, pero tan pronto como hablé de él, se me metió en la cabeza como algo que no me dejaría descansar hasta que lo hiciera. Al principio

pensó que no hablaba en serio, pero le convencí, y no era un hombre fácil de sorprender. Estuvo de acuerdo en que sería por tu bien, y lo mejor que podía hacerse para ti. Una gran cantante y una actriz es una reina, pero no transmite la realeza a su hijo. Todo eso sucedió en Nápoles. Y, por consiguiente, nombré a Sir Hugo como depositario de tu fortuna. Eso es lo que hice; y me alegré de hacerlo. Mi padre me había tiranizado; le preocupaba más que viniera un nieto que lo que se preocupaba por mí: yo no contaba para nada. Tú ibas a ser un judío como él; ibas a ser como él quería. Pero eras mi hijo, y era mi turno de decidir lo que ibas a ser. Y me dije que nunca sabrías que eras judío.

—Y durante meses los acontecimientos me han ido preparando para que me alegre de ser judío —dijo Deronda, sintiendo como se remontaba de nuevo su oposición. La cuestión tocaba la parte más importante de su experiencia—. Siempre habría sido mejor que hubiera conocido la verdad. Siempre me he rebelado contra el secreto que parecía ignominia. No es ninguna vergüenza tener padres judíos, la vergüenza es repudiarlos.

—Me dices que es una vergüenza, entonces, que usara ese secreto —dijo su madre, irrumpiendo con un nuevo enojo—. No comparto esa vergüenza. No tengo ningún motivo de avergonzarme. Me he desembarazado de los harapos judíos y de los cuchicheos de la gente cuando nos ven, como si estuviéramos tatuados bajo nuestras ropas, a pesar de que nuestras caras son tan parecidas como las suyas. Te libré de los desprecios que nos persiguen y arrinconan a los judíos. No estoy avergonzada de lo que hice. Era lo mejor para ti.

—Entonces, ¿por qué has arreglado las cosas ahora? No, no las has arreglado, los efectos de ese secreto no se arreglarán nunca. Pero ¿por qué me has venido a buscar ahora para contarme que soy judío? —dijo Deronda, con una intensidad en su oposición que era casi amarga. Parecía como si sus palabras hubieran despertado una obstinación de la raza latente en él.

—¿Por qué? Ah, ¿por qué? —dijo la Princesa, levantándose rápidamente y caminando hacia el otro extremo de la habitación, hasta que se dio la vuelta y se acercó a él lentamente, a la vez que él se levantó también. Entonces ella comenzó a hablar de nuevo con voz más refrenada—: No te lo puedo explicar; solo puedo decir las cosas tal como son. No amo la religión de mi padre ahora más que lo hice entonces. Antes de que me casara por segunda vez estaba bautizada; me hice como la gente entre la que vivía. Tenía derecho a hacerlo; yo no era como un animal, obligada a ir con mi propio rebaño. No

me he arrepentido; no diré que me he arrepentido. Pero aún así… —en esto se acercó más a su hijo y dejó de hablar; a continuación se retiró un poco y permaneció de pie sin moverse, como si estuviera decidida a no ejercer exteriormente su imperiosa influencia; pero, cuando prosiguió con su conversación, cada vez era menos consciente de todo salvo del temor que refrenaba su voz—. Es la enfermedad, no tengo dudas de que ha sido por la enfermedad, mi mente ha retrocedido: empezó hace más de un año. Ya ves mi pelo gris, mi aspecto desgastado; todo ha llegado muy rápido. A veces agonizo de pena, diría que está noche es uno de esos momentos. Es como si toda la vida que he escogido, todos los pensamientos, toda mi voluntad, me abandonaran y me dejaran sola con mis recuerdos, y no puedo escapar de eso: mi dolor parece mantenerme allí. Mi infancia, mi adolescencia, el día de mi boda, el día de la muerte de mi padre, parece no haber nada desde entonces. Y luego, me sobreviene un gran espanto: ¿qué sé de la vida o de la muerte? Y lo que mi padre llamaba «correcto» es como un poder que me sujeta, que me agarra. Bien, haré su voluntad. No puedo entrar en la oscuridad sin satisfacerle. He ocultado lo que era de él. Pensé que alguna vez lo quemaría. Pero no lo he quemado. ¡Doy gracias a Dios de no haberlo quemado!

Se dejó caer de nuevo en sus cojines, visiblemente fatigada. Deronda, demasiado conmocionado por su sufrimiento para dejarse influir por otros impulsos, se acercó a ella, y le dijo suplicante:

—¿No querrás descansar esta noche? Dejemos el resto para mañana.

—No —dijo con decisión—. Lo confesaré todo, ahora que he empezado. A menudo, cuando estoy relajada, todo se desvanece; todo mi ser regresa a la realidad; pero sé que se hundirá de nuevo, y vendrá la otra parte de mí, los pobres y solitarios restos abandonados de mi ser, que no pueden resistir nada. Resistir era parte de mi naturaleza, y afirmaba «Tengo derecho a resistir». Bueno, también digo lo mismo cuando ya no me quedan fuerzas. Me has oído decirlo y no me desdigo. Pero cuando mi fuerza se va, otro derecho se me impone como una vara de hierro en una mano inexorable; e incluso cuando estoy relajada, aparecen los fantasmas a la luz del día. Y ahora tú me lo has puesto peor —dijo, con un repentino retorno de su ímpetu—: pero te lo he contado todo. ¿Y qué reproche tienes que hacerme —añadió con amargura—, si te he alegrado al decirte que eres judío? Joseph Kalonymos me lo reprochó: dijo que te habías convertido en un inglés orgulloso de serlo, que se resentía de ser tocado por un judío. ¡Ojalá hubiera sido cierto! —concluyó, con una

nueva alteración portentosa. Era como si su mente se estuviera dividiendo en dos, una parte quedando pasmada y la otra volcada en la acción impulsiva.

—¿Quién es Joseph Kalonymos? —dijo Deronda, recordando fugazmente a aquel judío que le tocó el brazo en la sinagoga de Frankfurt.

—¡Ah! Cierta venganza le hizo volver del este, para poder verte y venir a reprocharme. Era el amigo de mi padre. Conocía tu nacimiento, sabía que mi marido había muerto, y una vez, hace veinte años, después de haber estado fuera en el Levante, vino a verme y a preguntar sobre ti. Le dije que estabas muerto: quería que estuvieras muerto para todo el mundo de mi infancia. Si le hubiera dicho que vivías, habría interferido en mis planes: se le habría metido en la cabeza hacer de padre, y hacerme reflexionar sobre lo que había hecho. ¿Qué podía hacer sino decirle que estabas muerto? Ya estaba hecho. Si le hubiera hablado de ti habría habido problemas y escándalo, y todo para conquistar a la que nadie había conquistado. Yo era fuerte entonces, y solía salirme con la mía, aunque me costara alguna pelea primero. Lo hice de forma que no hubiera ninguna pelea. Creía entonces que no le estaba engañando del todo: habría sido lo mismo al final; o si no lo mismo, algo peor. Me creyó y me rogó que le entregara el cofre que mi padre nos había encargado a mi marido y a mí que le entregáramos a nuestro hijo mayor. Sabía lo que había en el cofre: cosas que retumbaban en mis oídos desde que tenía uso de razón, cosas que fueron embutidas en mi mente para que las tuviera presente toda mi vida, una vida que crecía como un árbol. Una vez, después de que muriera mi marido, estuve a punto de quemar el cofre. Pero era difícil de quemar; y quemar un cofre y papeles parece un acto deshonroso. No he cometido ningún acto deshonroso, salvo lo que los judíos llaman deshonroso. Tenía guardado el cofre y se lo di a Joseph Kalonymos. Se marchó triste, y dijo: «Si te casas de nuevo, y le nace otro nieto al que partió, le entregaré a él el cofre». Asentí en silencio. No pretendía casarme de nuevo, igual que no pretendía ser la mujer trastornada que soy ahora.

Dejó de hablar, y echó la cabeza hacia atrás mientras miraba vagamente hacia delante. Su pensamiento viajaba a través de los años, y cuando comenzó a hablar de nuevo, su voz había perdido su espíritu argumentativo; y había caído en un tono de velado desconsuelo.

—Pero hace unos meses este Kalonymos te vio en la sinagoga de Frankfurt. Te vio entrar en el hotel, y fue a preguntar tu nombre. No había nadie más en el mundo a quien el nombre le diría algo sobre mí.

—Entonces, ¿no es mi verdadero nombre? —dijo Deronda, que no aceptaba ni siquiera esta forma de haberle ocultado al mundo.

—Oh, tan real como los demás —dijo su madre, con indiferencia—. Los judíos siempre están cambiando sus nombres. La familia de mi padre había mantenido el nombre de Charisi: mi marido era un Charisi. Cuando triunfé como cantante lo cambié por Alcharisi. Pero hubo una rama de la familia a la que mi padre perdió la pista que se llamaban a sí mismos Deronda, y cuando quise un nombre para ti, y Sir Hugo dijo «que sea un nombre extranjero», pensé en Deronda. Pero Joseph Kalonymos había oído hablar a mi padre de la rama, y el nombre confirmó su sospecha. Empezó a sospechar lo que había hecho. Era como si todo le hubiera sido susurrado desde el aire. Averiguó dónde estaba. Viajó a Rusia para verme; me encontró débil y trastornada. Había vuelto otra vez, con su pelo blanco, y con el alma llena de rabia hacia mí. Me dijo que me iba a ir a la tumba revestida de falsedad y fraude: falsedad hacia mi padre y fraude hacia mi propio hijo. Me acusó de haberte escondido a ti tu propio nacimiento, y de que fueras criado como si hubieras sido el hijo de un caballero inglés. Bueno, era cierto; y veinte años atrás habría mantenido que tenía derecho a hacerlo. Pero no puedo mantener nada ahora. No tengo una fe fuerte en nada. Mi padre podía tener a Dios de su lado. Las palabras de este hombre me asaltaron como dientes de león. Las amenazas de mi padre me comieron a mí y a mi dolor. Si lo cuento todo, si pongo todas las cartas boca arriba, ¿qué más se me puede pedir? No puedo conseguir amar a la gente que nunca amé; ¿no es suficiente haber perdido la vida que amé?

Se había inclinado un poco hacia delante en su bajo tono suplicante, que parecía como un grito ahogado: sus brazos y sus manos estaban estirados completamente en toda su longitud, como si se esforzaran en la súplica. El alma de Deronda estaba absorbida en la angustia de la compasión. No le podía importar ahora haber sido rechazado antes. Su compasión inundaba el perdón. Su único impulso fue arrodillarse ante ella y tomar su mano con delicadeza, entre sus palmas, mientras dijo en esa voz exquisita y tranquilizadora que expresa la unidad con el que sufre:

—¡Madre, consuélate!

Ella no parecía inclinada a rechazarlo ahora, sino que le miró y dejó que cogiera sus dos manos entre las suyas. Las lágrimas afluyeron poco a poco, pero se frotó su pañuelo en los ojos y luego apoyó su mejilla contra su frente, como si deseara que no se miraran el uno al otro.

—¿No es posible que pueda estar ahora cerca de ti y consolarte? —dijo Deronda. Estaba bajo esa tensión de la compasión que nos impulsa al sacrificio.

—No, no es posible —respondió, alzando la cabeza de nuevo y arrastrando su mano como si quisiera que él se moviera—. Tengo un marido y cinco niños. Ninguno de ellos conoce tu existencia.

Deronda se sintió dolorosamente acallado. Se levantó y permaneció en pie a poca distancia.

—Te preguntarás porqué me casé —continuó, bajo la influencia de un nuevo pensamiento—. No pretendía casarme nunca más. Quería ser libre y vivir para mi arte. Había roto contigo. No tenía ningún lazo. Durante nueve años fui una reina. Disfruté la vida que había anhelado. Pero llegó un momento en que empezó a sucederme una cosa. Empecé a volverme olvidadiza. A veces cantaba fuera de tono. Me lo dijeron. Otra mujer pretendía ocupar mi puesto. No podía soportar la perspectiva del fracaso y el declive. Me resultaba horrible. —Se levantó otra vez, con un estremecimiento, y alzó las manos apretadas como el que se espanta de los misiles—. Eso me llevó a casarme. Me hice creer que prefería ser la mujer de un noble ruso que ser la actriz lírica más grande de Europa; me lo creí, actué como tal. Era porque sentía cómo se me escapaba mi grandeza, igual que veo cómo se me escapa la vida ahora. No iba a esperarme a que los hombres dijeran: «Sería mejor que lo dejara».

Se hundió de nuevo en su sitio, y miró al cielo nocturno mientras proseguía:

—Me arrepentí. Era una decisión tomada en la desesperación. Esas salidas de tono eran solo debidas a una pequeña enfermedad; luego se pasó. Me arrepentí, pero era demasiado tarde. No podía dar vuelta atrás. Todas las cosas me lo impedían, todas las cosas.

Su rostro reflejaba un nuevo cansancio, pero su hijo se abstuvo de ofrecerle otra vez dejar las explicaciones para el día siguiente: evidentemente había cierto alivio mental para ella al decir libremente lo que nunca hasta entonces se había permitido decir. Se quedó quieto mientras ella guardaba un silencio más largo de lo habitual, y la luz iba decayendo poco a poco. Al final se volvió hacia él y dijo:

—Ya no puedo aguantarlo más. —Alzó la mano, pero luego la retiró rápidamente diciendo—: Quédate. ¿Cómo sé que no podré verte otra vez? No puedo soportar que me vean cuando estoy afligida.

Cogió un libro de bolsillo, y sacando de él una carta dijo:

—Esto está dirigido al banco de Mainz, donde vas a ir a por el cofre de tu abuelo. Es una carta escrita por Joseph Kalonymos: si él mismo no está allí, obedecerán a esta orden de su voluntad.

Cuando Deronda hubo cogido la carta, ella dijo, con esfuerzo pero más amablemente que antes:

—Arrodíllate otra vez, y déjame besarte.

Él obedeció, y sosteniendo su cabeza entre sus manos, le besó solemnemente en la frente.

—Ya ves, no me quedaba vida para amarte —dijo en un bajo murmuro—. Pero tienes más fortunas. Sir Hugo la ha mantenido en reserva. Te dejé toda la fortuna de tu padre. En esto, nunca me podrán acusar de robarte nada.

—Si hubieras necesitado algo habría trabajado para ti —dijo Deronda, consciente de un anhelo decepcionado, un cierre definitivo de sus tempranas perspectivas provenientes de su imaginación afectiva.

—No necesito nada que pueda darme la habilidad de un hombre —dijo su madre, sosteniendo todavía su cabeza, y examinando a fondo sus rasgos—. Pero tal vez ahora he satisfecho la voluntad de mi padre, será tu rostro el que me imagine ahora, tu rostro joven y amoroso.

—¿Pero me verás otra vez? —dijo Deronda ansioso.

—Sí, tal vez. Espera, espera. Déjame ahora.

Capítulo 52

> La même fermeté qui sert à résister à l'amour sert aussi à le rendre violent et durable; et les personnes faibles qui sont toujours agitées des passions n'en sont presque jamais véritablement remplies.
>
> La Rochefoucauld[256]

Entre las cartas de Deronda de la mañana siguiente había una de Hans Meyrick de cuatro páginas, escritas con la pequeña y bella letra que caracterizaba a la familia Meyrick.

> Mi querido Redonda, como contestación a tu esbozo de tus movimientos por Italia y tu visión de los asuntos del mundo en general, yo puedo decirte que aquí en casa la opinión más razonable respecto a las consecuencias de las causas presentes es la de que «ya se verá con el tiempo». En cuanto a las causas presentes de efectos pasados, vemos ahora que los malversados y tardíos telegramas daban cuenta de la plaga del ganado del año pasado, lo que es una refutación de la mal llamada filosofía, y justifica la compensación de los granjeros. Mi propia idea de que saltará alguna epidemia en breve entre la clase comercial, y que la causa se propagará posteriormente con la rápida venta de todas las pinturas rechazadas, ha sido considerada como un uso incorrecto de la analogía; pero hay mentalidades que no dudarán en quitar la paz al pintor descuidado. En mi opinión hay una gran belleza en la concepción de que algún mal juez pague un alto precio por mis series Berenice, y que los hombres de la ciudad sean castigados por mi mala suerte.
>
> Mientras tanto, me consuelo de tu ausencia intentando aprovecharme de ello —brillando como Eósforo cuando Hyperion ha partido[257]— sentado con nuestro profeta hebreo, y estudiando su cabeza en las horas en que solía estar ocupado contigo, ganándome su confianza como joven gentil erudito, que habría sido judío si hubiera podido, y dándole la razón en cuanto al principio general, que cualquier cosa que sea lo mejor, es, por esa razón, judía. Nunca fue mi fuerte ser un buen razonador, pero soy capaz de ver que si lo mejor es A, y resulta que B es lo mejor, entonces B debe ser A, por muy poco que lo esperaras de antemano. Basándome en ese principio puedo ver la fuerza de un panfleto que leí una vez y que probaba que cualquier arte bueno era protestante. Sin embargo, nuestro profeta es un modelo interesante fuera de lo común para un pintor —un modelo mejor que el que tuvo Rembrandt con su Rabino[258]—, y nunca me separo de él sin haber aprendido algo nuevo. Por ejemplo, me sorprende constantemente que, a pesar de todo su ardiente sentimiento por su raza y sus tradiciones, no es un judío exageradamente conservador, atacando al mundo cristiano, y regocijándose en la perspectiva de que las bocas cristinas esperarán en vano obtener un trozo de carne asada de Leviatán[259], mientras que Israel no parará de comer platos *ad limitum*[260]. (Ya percibes lo que mis estudios me han enseñado esperar de la ortodoxia judía). Te confieso que siempre había tomado a la ligera lo que me contabas de Mardoqueo, como algo excusable, simplemente como parte de tu disposición a considerar un punto de vista antediluviano para no hacer ninguna injusticia a los megaterios[261]. Pero ahora que le he escuchado en persona, creo que es sinceramente una especie de creyente filosófico-alegórico-místico, pero con una aguda dialéctica, de forma que puede acallar cualquier argumento casi sin hablar. La mezcla puede ser una de las prerrogativas

judías, por lo que sé. De hecho, su mente parece tan abierta que mis propias opiniones tienen amplia cabida en ella, y es su tarea, no la mía, hacer que concuerden con las suyas. Dejé que fuera él quien sentara nuestras bases, al no haber visto nunca una base que no fuera uno de los elefantes que sostienen el mundo, algo más o menos difícil y caro de mantener. Mis medios no me permiten mantener un elefante privado. En lugar de ello, entré en el misterio, siendo más barato y de más duración —una especie de gas que seguramente es mantenido de forma constante por el deshinchamiento de los elefantes—. Y si me gusta el aspecto de una opinión, la acojo cortésmente, sin indagaciones sospechosas. Casi me siento inclinado a compartir con Mardoqueo la noción de que un cristiano entero es tres cuartas partes de un judío, y que desde los tiempos alejandrinos las mentes más completas han sido judías; pues pienso hacer ver a Mirah que, dejando aparte los incidentes arábicos y demás, hay realmente poca diferencia entre mí y Maimónides. Pero últimamente me he dado cuenta que es tu frívola amante la que no puede evitar hacer una declaración. Si los gestos de Mirah fueran menos sugerentes, y uno no sintiera que está en el cielo al estar en su presencia y observarla, me habría lanzado hace tiempo a sus pies, y le habría pedido que me dijera, con menos indirectas, si desea hacerme perder la cabeza. Tengo un talento natural para la esperanza, que es algo tan bueno como tener una hacienda en decadencia, siempre que sepa resistir la tentación de volverla en certeza y estropearlo todo. Mi Esperanza camina entre flores de huerto, siente la cálida nieve derritiéndose por el sol, y no duda de nada; pero vislumbrando la Certidumbre a la distancia, ve una fea deidad como Jano[262], guiñándole dudosamente un ojo, y aparta rápidamente la mirada. Pero tú, con tu raciocinio supremo, tu humildad, y tu preparación para lo peor, no sabes nada acerca de la Esperanza, esa deliciosa doncella inmortal, por siempre cortejada, por siempre propicia, a la que los tontos han llamado embustera, como si fuera la Esperanza la que trajera el carro de la decepción, mientras que es su enemigo mortal, la Certidumbre, de la que solo escapa por transformación. (¿Te das cuenta de mi nueva vena alegórica?). No obstante, y hablando en serio, permíteme que alegue que la verdad triunfará, que los prejuicios se derretirán ante ella, que la diversidad, acompañada del merecimiento, será sentida como satisfacción, y que la aspiración virtuosa no quedará frustrada; las cuales, si no me equivoco, son doctrinas escolares, e implican que la judía que yo prefiera me preferirá también a mí. Y los cabeza-cuadradas podrán citar generalidades, pero el maestro discierne los casos particulares que representan.

No creo que mi compañía consuele mucho a Mardoqueo de tu ausencia, pero viene ocasionalmente otro sustituto en forma de Jacob Cohen. Vale la pena quedarse con la expresión de nuestro profeta cuando tiene sentado sobre su rodilla a esa especie de joven Israel, y vierte poco a poco cierta inspiración semítica con una mirada sublime de paciencia y devoción melancólica. A veces a Jacob se le ocurre que el hebreo será más edificante para él si se tapa las orejas con las manos, e imita los venerables sonidos que oye amortiguados. Cuando Mardoqueo le baja con cuidado los puños y los sostiene bien sujetos, los demás miembros de Jacob se mueven en una actividad extraordinaria, como si estuviera paseando por un zoológico e intentara imitar a cada animal que viera; los que mejor le salían era el búho y el pecarí. Pero diría que ya has visto algo de esto. A mí, Jacob me trata con la máxima familiaridad, y parece mirarme normalmente como un artículo cristiano de segunda mano, que probablemente vaya a bajar de precio; me señala mis propias desventajas con una franqueza que parece que piense en alguna futura compra. Es bonito, de todas formas, ver cómo le cambia la cara cuando Mirah entra en la habitación. Se vuelve un niño de golpe —su edad le sorprende a uno como las prendas israelitas del desierto, a veces parece tener cuarenta años, a pesar de tener el aspecto de recién llegado al mundo. Pero cuando viene Mirah, me recuerda a uno de esos perros criados por mujeres, y que solo ellas pueden controlarlos. Pero el perro quiere también a Mardoqueo, y trae caramelos de ciruela para compartir con él, llenándose la boca hasta límites embarazosos, y mirando como Mardoqueo se queda solo con una pequeña porción. A juzgar por este Jacob moderno de seis años, me asombra que su raza no nos haya comprado a todos hace tiempo, considerando a

nuestras generaciones más débiles como mercancía y dinero, como se trataba a los esclavos. Hay una judía de la que no me importaría ser su esclavo. Pero no me gusta imaginar que Mirah entristece y que a la vez trata de ocultarlo. Es del todo natural, teniendo en cuenta que tiene que velar la lenta agonía de su hermano, al que adora con unas miradas tales de devoción amorosa que ya me gustaría estar en el sitio de él.

En cuanto al resto, estamos un poco más felices de lo normal. Rex Gascoigne —¿recuerdas haber admirado un busto de mis bosquejos, un tipo con un buen labio superior, leyendo leyes?— ha alquilado unas habitaciones en la ciudad no lejos de nosotros, y ha tenido viviendo con él a una hermana suya, muy pulcra, (también con un buen labio superior), durante la última quincena. Les he presentado a ambos a mi madre y a las niñas, que han descubierto por la señorita Gascoigne… ¡¡¡que es prima de tu duquesa Vandyke!!! He puesto los signos de exclamación para macar bien la sorpresa que la información me produjo en un principio. Al reflexionar sobre ello, me di cuenta de que no había que sorprenderse tanto, a menos que hubiera creído de antemano que nadie puede ser primo de nadie sin yo saberlo. Este tipo de sorpresas, digo yo, depende de la actividad de la columna vertebral, más que del cerebro. Había un tipo que solía ver en Roma que la información más simple le causaba una gran sorpresa. Le dijeras lo que le dijeras, que te gustaban por ejemplo las botas cómodas, siempre respondía: «No puede ser. ¿Ah sí?». Con el mismo asombro: el mismo tipo del que el poeta Browne[263] escribió proféticamente:

> «Un infeliz tan vacío que si había algún vacío en la naturaleza debía estar en él».

Ya te lo he contado todo sobre él, tenía una columna muy nerviosa.

No obstante, este parentesco con la duquesa salió por casualidad un día en el que Mirah estaba con ellos en casa hablando de los Mallinger. A propósito, me estoy convirtiendo en alguien tan importante que se me solapan las invitaciones. Gascoigne quiere que baje con él a la rectoría de su padre en agosto y demos una vuelta por el campo. Pero creo que por mi propio interés, bien entendido, iré a la Abadía de Topping, puesto que Sir Hugo me ha invitado y propone —¡que Dios le bendiga por su imprudencia!— que debería dibujar a sus tres hijas sentadas en un banco, como él dice, al estilo de Gainsborough. Vino el otro día a mi estudio y me aconsejó dedicarme al retrato. Por supuesto ya sé lo que eso significa. «Mi querido amigo, tus intentos con la historia y la poesía son simplemente lamentables. Pero tu brocha es la de un pintor de retratos de éxito: tiene algo de verdad y una gran facilidad para la mentira; tu idealismo no servirá jamás para dioses y diosas ni para historias heroicas, pero puede cotizar alto como zalamería. El destino, amigo mío, ha hecho que la rueda que pone trabas —*rota posterior curras, et in axe secundo*[264]— corra por detrás, porque no puedes evitarlo». ¡Qué gran esfuerzo supone evidentemente para nuestros amigos darnos estas cándidas opiniones! Conocí incluso un hombre que se tomó la molestia de llamar, para decirme que había expuesto irremediablemente mi falta de juicio al tratar mi tema, y que si le hubiera preguntado a él, me habría dado su propio juicio. Tal fue mi ingratitud y mi rapidez en mi imaginación, que todavía estaba él hablando cuando ya había esbozado interiormente un Juicio Final con la cándida fisionomía de ese amigo en el lado izquierdo. Pero todo esto se aparta de Sir Hugo, cuya forma de insinuar que los dones de uno no son de primera categoría es tan rematadamente buena y oportuna que empiezo a pensar que es una ventaja no estar entre los pobres tipos que están en lo más alto. Y su amabilidad hacia mí me sabe aún mejor porque proviene de su amor por ti, viejo amigo. Su charla es divertida fuera de lo habitual. Por cierto, me dijo que tu duquesa Vandyke se ha ido con su marido a hacer un viaje en yate por el Mediterráneo. He estado meditando en que es posible tomar tierra desde un yate, o embarcar en un yate desde tierra. ¿Por casualidad tendrás oportunidad de continuar con ella tu discusión teológica sobre el supralapsarianismo?[265] —creo que dijiste que sus doctrinas eran muy enrevesadas. ¿Es el Duque Alfonso[266] también

teológico? Quizás un ario que rechaza la triplicidad (Notas al director de escena: mientras D. está leyendo, su rostro muestra un profundo desprecio hasta que al llegar a la última palabra deja caer la carta, agarra su gabardina con actitud solemne, permanece así con una mirada general tremenda, mientras expresa el siguiente soliloquio: «Oh, noche, oh, negrura, etc, etc»).

Perdona la brevedad de esta carta. No estás acostumbrado a esperar más de mí que los simples hechos desnudos, sin comentarios ni digresiones. He omitido un hecho: que los Klesmer, la noche antes de su marcha se comportaron de forma magnánima, brillando como se espera de los planetas que reúnen la genialidad y la fortuna. Han llenado a Mirah de regalos orientales.

¡Qué suerte tendríamos si regresaras y te presentaras en la Abadía mientras yo estoy allí! Me voy a comportar con total discreción y a ganar opiniones favorables. Pero me escaparé a la ciudad de vez en cuando, solo para echar una ojeada al Jardín del Edén. Ya ves cuánta erudición hebrea tengo —al nivel de Lord Bolingbroke[267], que no sabía hebreo, pero «entendía ese tipo de doctrina y lo que se ha escrito sobre ella». Si Mirah me lo mandase, me zambulliría en el triliteralismo[268]. De hecho, no veo diferencia en si están o no las vocales. Pero mientras dure la vida de su hermano, sospecho que no escuchará a ningún pretendiente, ni siquiera a uno «cuyos cabellos son como un rebaño de cabras sobre el Monte Galaad», y me enorgullezco de que a pocas cabezas le sientan tan bien la comparación como a la mía. Así que sigo con mi esperanza entre las flores de la huerta. Devotamente,

HANS MEYRICK

Algunos meses antes, esta carta de Hans habría irritado profundamente a Deronda: sus pensamientos románticos hacia Mirah le habrían repugnado, y apenas habría sentido conmiseración alguna por la probable decepción de su amigo. Pero las cosas habían cambiado desde marzo. Mirah ya no estaba en una posición tan crítica de deuda hacia los Meyrick, y la propia posición de Deronda había ido experimentando un cambio que acababa de culminar con la revelación de su nacimiento. La nueva apertura al futuro, a pesar de que no confiaba en ninguna visión definitiva, arrojaba inevitablemente una nueva luz, e influyó en su forma de ver el pasado y el presente; por eso, lo que Hans denominaba como su esperanza no le parecía ahora a Deronda como una irracionalidad maliciosa que levantara su indignación, sino una obsesión persistente y poco común, fruto de una fantasía extravagante, y habría podido incluso compadecerse de los pertinentes sufrimientos de su amigo, si hubiera creído probable su sufrimiento. Pero uno de los principales pensamientos que le ocupó ese largo día, que pasó sin recibir ninguna nueva cita de su madre, fue el argumento que la naturaleza de Hans Meyrick no era de las que el amor tocara tan a fondo las raíces de forma que convirtiera la decepción en dolor; era demasiado inquieto, demasiado impresionable por la novedad, dispuesto incluso a verse a sí mismo como material imaginativo, y llevar su pena como un traje de fantasía. «Justo empieza a descubrir y jugar con el amor: se está tomando todo el asunto como una comedia», se dijo Deronda; «sabe muy bien que no tiene ninguna oportunidad. Así es él: nunca abriendo los ojos a

cualquier posible objeción que yo pueda hacer a sus efusiones sobre Mirah. ¡Pobre Hans! Si ambos estuviéramos bajo una fuerte granizada, él aullaría como un griego, y si yo no aullara también, nunca se le ocurriría pensar que lo estoy pasando tan mal como él. Con todo, tiene buen corazón y es cariñoso en su intención, y no puedo decir que no se preocupe por lo que le pase a los demás, pero siempre acaba imaginando cómo le va a afectar eso a él».

Con esta pizca de mordacidad Deronda se sacó de encima la ligera irritación causada en esos momentos por la inocente expansión de Hans. Las tonterías sobre Gwendolen, que traían la noticia que se había ido en yate con su marido, solo sugerían una preocupante continuación a la forma en que habían tenido que despedirse. Pero había una frase en la carta que provocó una ansiedad mayor y más inmediata. La sospecha de Hans de que Mirah ocultaba una tristeza no tenía que ver con los deseos de él, y por tanto, en vez de menospreciar esta observación, Deronda comenzó a pensar en la causa de su tristeza. ¿Era algún suceso acaecido durante su ausencia, o solo el temor creciente a algún advenimiento? ¿Era algo, tal vez alterable, en la nueva posición en la que la habían colocado? ¿O le había comunicado Mardoqueo, contra su firme decisión, esas esperanzas peculiares sobre él, Deronda, y su naturaleza sensible había resultado herida por el descubrimiento que la voluntad o la tenacidad de su hermano por sus convicciones visionarias habían actuado coercitivamente sobre su amistad, había resultado herida por el miedo a que hubiera más compasión que trato de igual a igual en la relación de Deronda hacia él? Pues entre toda la renuncia sosegada de Mirah, la sed que evidentemente tenía su alma de recibir el tributo de igualdad implicaba un gran dolor si se daba cuenta de que lo que había tomado por una admiración puramente reverencial hacia su hermano tenía su mezcla de condescendencia.

En esta última conjetura, Deronda no se había equivocado en cuanto a la cualidad de la naturaleza de Mirah: la protesta latente contra el tratamiento a la que había estado sometida toda su vida hasta que le encontró. Pues esa gratitud que no le habría dejado no tener en cuenta a su benefactor, provenía en parte de la comparación entusiasta con la que los demás habían pensado prestarle. La afinidad de Deronda con sus sentimientos le permitió penetrar en tales secretos. Pero no estaba cerca de la verdad al admitir la idea que Mardoqueo había traspasado su reticencia característica. A ningún alma excepto a Deronda había relatado la historia de la relación entre ellos, o la seguridad sobre el origen de su amigo: no era solo que estos temas eran para él demasiado sagrados para comentarlos sin una razón de peso, sino que se

había dado cuenta del estremecimiento de Deronda cada vez que mencionaba su nacimiento; y la estricta reserva que había impedido a Mardoqueo contestar a una pregunta sobre un asunto privado de la familia Cohen actuaba aquí con más motivo.

—Esdras —le dijo un día Mirah— ¿cómo es que hablo continuamente al señor Deronda como si fuera judío?

Él le sonrió tranquilamente, y le dijo:

—Supongo que es porque nos trata como si fuera nuestro hermano. Pero no le gusta tratar el tema de la diferencia de nacimiento.

—Nunca ha vivido con sus padres, dice el señor Hans —continuó Mirah, para quien esto era necesariamente una cuestión de interés, sobre todo si le importaba la persona.

—Procura no averiguar estas cosas a través del señor Hans —dijo Mardoqueo seriamente, acariciándole sus rizos, como solía hacer por costumbre—. Lo que Daniel Deronda quiera decirnos sobre él, le toca a él mismo contarlo.

Y Mirah se sintió reprendida, como había hecho Deronda. Pero ser reprendida en esto por Mardoqueo la llenó de orgullo.

—No existe nadie más grande que mi hermano —dijo a la señora Meyrick un día que llamó a la puerta de su casa en Chelsea mientras iba de camino a casa, y como había esperado, encontró a la pequeña madre sola—. Es difícil pensar que pertenece al mismo mundo que la gente con la que me solía relacionar. Ya le dije una vez que hacían que la vida pareciese una casa de locos; pero cuando estoy con Esdras me hace sentir que su vida es un gran bien, aunque haya sufrido mucho; no como yo, que quería morir por haber sufrido un poco, solo un poco. Su alma está tan llena, es imposible que deseé la muerte como hice yo. Tengo la misma sensación que experimenté ayer, cuando estaba cansada, y regresé a casa por el parque después de que cayera una dulce lluvia y el sol brillara sobre la hierba y las flores. Todo en el cielo y bajo el cielo parecía tan puro y hermoso que el cansancio, los problemas y la locura parecían reducirse a una pequeña parte de lo que realmente son, y me volví más paciente y esperanzada.

La nota de ingenuidad y melancolía de este discurso hizo que la señora Meyrick examinara a Mirah con más detalle. Tras sacarse el sombrero y estirarse los rizos con aire de cansancio, se sentó en una silla enfrente de su amiga en su posición habitual, con los pies y las manos cruzadas; a esa distancia parecía una estatua a color llena de serenidad. Pero la señora

Meyrick distinguió un rasgo nuevo de sufrimiento reprimido en su rostro, que sugería que ser paciente y esperanzado requería cierta influencia extra.

—¿Te preocupa algo últimamente, querida? —dijo la señora Meyrick, dejando a un lado su trabajo de costura, como signo de atención.

Mirah dudó antes de decir:

—Creo que enseguida hablo de problemas. Me parece descortés preocupar a los demás por temas dolorosos, a menos que estuviera segura que de fuera para impedir algo peor. Y tal vez soy demasiada precipitada y temerosa.

—Oh, querida, las madres están para aceptar los dolores y los problemas que les den sus hijos. ¿Es por qué las lecciones de canto son muy escasas, y puede ser que no continúen al año siguiente? El éxito en estas cosas no puede llegar de repente. —La señora Meyrick no creía que estuviera dando con la verdadera causa de su pena; pero la corrección de una conjetura era un buen canal para el inicio de una confidencia.

—No, no es eso —dijo Mirah, sacudiendo la cabeza suavemente—. Estoy un poco decepcionada porque muchas señoras me dijeron que querían que les diera clase a ellas o a sus hijas, y luego ya no oí más de ellas. Pero tal vez después de las vacaciones enseñe en algunas escuelas. Además, ya sabe que ahora soy tan rica como una princesa. No he tocado las cien libras que la señora Klesmer me dio; y no temo que Esdras necesite nunca nada, porque está el señor Deronda, que me dijo: «Es el principal honor de mi vida que su hermano lo comparta todo conmigo». ¡Oh, no! Esdras y yo no tenemos nada que temer por cosas como el comer y el vestir.

—Pero hay otra cosa que te atemoriza —aventuró la señora Meyrick—, un temor a algo que puede disturbar tu paz; no pienses en lo malo del futuro, querida hija, a menos que sea para poder defenderte de ello. La ansiedad no es buena para nada si no podemos convertirla en defensa. Pero no hay defensa posible para todas las cosas que puedan suceder. ¿Tienes alguna razón más para estar ansiosa que las que tenías hace un mes?

—Sí, si la tengo —dijo Mirah—. No se lo he contado a Esdras. No me he atrevido. Le ruego me perdone que no pueda seguir sin contárselo a usted. Tengo más razones para estar preocupada. Hace ya cinco días de ello. Estoy segura de haber visto a mi padre.

La señora Myrick se encogió lo que pudo, cruzando los brazos alrededor de su pecho e inclinándose hacia delante, para refrenarse de atacar con sus peores epítetos al padre.

—Ha cambiado en este año —continuó Mirah—. Antes de que lo dejara ya estaba muy desfigurado y gastado. ¿Recuerda que le dije que a veces lloraba? Estaba siempre excitado de una manera o de otra. Le he contado a Esdras todo lo que le conté a usted, y dice que a mi padre le había dado por apostar, algo que hace sentirse a la gente desconsolada y poco después exaltada de nuevo. Y ahora (le vi solo por un momento) su rostro estaba aún más consumido y llevaba ropas harapientas. Iba con un hombre que tenía todavía un aspecto mucho peor que él, que llevaba algo, y ambos se apresuraban por coger un ómnibus.

—Bueno, hija, él no te vio, espero.

—No. Acababa de salir de casa de la señora Raymond, y estaba esperando para cruzar la calle cerca del Arco de Mármol. Cogió el ómnibus enseguida y desapareció. Fue un momento terrible. Me pareció que volvía a mi vida anterior, y que era incluso peor que lo que había sido antes. Y no pude evitar sentirme salvada al ver que había desaparecido sin saber que yo estaba allí. Pero me dolía sentir eso, era algo odioso, casi como las palabras que tuve que recitar una vez en una obra, que «me había lavado las manos en la sangre de mis parientes». ¿Pues adónde iría mi padre? ¿Qué sería de él? Y el hecho de tener una hija que la cuidara a pesar de todo, podría haber evitado lo peor. ¿Hay una pena más grande que ver cómo lo que debería ser lo más bonito de la vida se torna en lo más desagradable? Todos estos sentimientos opuestos me oprimían y me quitaban toda mi fuerza. Nadie podría fingir eso. El teatro es lento y pobre comparado con lo que pasamos por dentro. No sé cómo llegué a llamar a un coche. Solo recuerdo que estaba ya en él cuando comencé a pensar: «No se lo puedo contar a Esdras; no debe saberlo ahora».

—¿Tienes miedo de angustiarle? —preguntó la señora Meyrick, aprovechando que Mirah hizo una pausa.

—Sí, y hay algo más —dijo Mirah, dudando, como si estuviera examinando a fondo su sentimiento antes de atreverse a hablar de él—. Quiero decírselo; no se lo puedo contar a nadie más. No se lo podría haber dicho ni a mi propia madre: a ella se lo habría ocultado. Me avergüenzo de mi padre, y tal vez sea extraño, pero la vergüenza es mayor ante Esdras que ante cualquier otra persona del mundo. Él quería que se lo contara todo sobre mi vida, y le obedecí. Pero para mí es desgarrador saber que esas cosas sobre mi padre las llegue a conocer Esdras. Y, ¿puede creerlo? Cuando me asalta el pensamiento de qué sucedería si mi padre llegara y se mostrara ante ambos, lo que más parece abrasarme es ver a mi padre estremeciéndose ante Esdras. Esa

es la verdad. No sé si es un sentimiento honesto. Pero no puedo evitar pensar que prefiero mantener a mi padre en secreto, y sufrir mucho por ello, si puedo evitar que se encuentre con mi hermano.

—No debes alentar ese sentimiento, Mirah —dijo la señora Meyrick, cortándola—. Sería muy peligroso; estaría mal. No debes impedir nada de eso.

—¿Pero debería contar a Esdras que he visto a mi padre? —dijo Mirah, en un tono de desaprobación.

—No —respondió la señora Meyrick, dudando—. No sé si es necesario hacer eso. Tu padre puede marcharse como los pájaros. No está claro que viniera por ti; puede que no le vuelvas a ver nunca más. Y en ese caso tu hermano habría sufrido sin motivo. Pero prométeme que si tu padre te ve, si entra de nuevo en contacto contigo de cualquier forma, nos lo harás saber. Prométeme eso solemnemente, Mirah. Tengo derecho a pedírtelo.

Mirah se lo pensó un poco, luego se inclinó hacia delante para poner sus manos en las de la señora Meyrick y dijo:

—Como usted me lo pide, se lo prometo. Soportaré esta vergüenza. Hace tanto tiempo que me he hecho a la idea de que debo soportar este tipo de dolor interior… Pero la vergüenza por mi padre me abrasa tanto más cuando pienso en su encuentro con Esdras. —Dejó de hablar uno o dos momentos, y luego dijo, en un nuevo tono de compasión anhelosa—: Y nosotros somos sus hijos, y él fue un tiempo joven como nosotros, y mi madre le amaba. ¡Oh! No puedo evitar verlo todo concluido, y me duele tan cruelmente.

Mirah no derramó lágrimas: toda su vida se había obligado a no ceder ante tal manifestación, que pronto cae bajo el control de motivos graves; pero parecía que una expresión muy intensa de pena había entrado en su voz. La señora Meyrick, con toda su agudeza y comprensión amorosa, no acababa de entender el sentimiento filial de Mirah que tenía raíces profundas bajo su indignación por las peores ofensas. Podía concebir que una madre se compadeciera de su hijo réprobo, pero no entendía en absoluto su exagerada susceptibilidad por su padre, cuya reaparición le había provocado esos sentimientos de protección. La promesa de Mirah, sin embargo, era un seguro contra su debilidad.

Ese incidente era el único motivo que la propia Mirah habría declarado por la oculta tristeza que Hans había adivinado. No podría haber explicado de forma precisa de qué forma había cambiado su carácter: era algo tan indefinido como la sensación de que se aproxima cambio de tiempo, con

signos externos extremadamente ligeros, como los que a menudo nos avergonzamos de encontrar todos lo que utilizamos como pretexto los sutiles cambios que operan en nuestro interior, no solo sin esfuerzo, sino incluso en contra de ellos, bajo la influencia de cualquier apasionamiento ciego. Tal vez la primera causa de inquietud la provocó el comportamiento de Gwendolen durante esa visita en la que utilizó como excusa el pedirle a Mirah que viniera a su casa a cantar pero que no tenía otro motivo que el extraño interrogatorio que le hizo exaltada sobre Deronda. Mirah había mantenido instintivamente en secreto esa visita, pero su recuerdo le había provocado una nueva susceptibilidad, y le hizo ser consciente como nunca lo fue, de las relaciones que Deronda debía tener con esa sociedad a la que ella misma se le permitía entrar de vez en cuando sin pertenecer a ella. Su vida y educación peculiar habían producido en ella una extraordinaria mezcla de inocencia, con conocimiento del mal del mundo, e incluso este conocimiento era una extraña combinación de la observación directa con los efectos de la lectura y del estudio de las obras de teatro. Sus recuerdos estaban llenos de situaciones pasionales y de intriga, que nunca hizo emocionalmente suyos, sino que se alejaba de ellos lo más posible, como había hecho con la vida real que le rodeaba. Algo de ese conocimiento imaginativo comenzaba ahora a envolver a la señora Grandcourt; y aunque Mirah no iba a dejar de admirar a Deronda, no podía evitar asociar cruda y dolorosamente la vida de él con un mundo aparte del suyo propio, en el que pudiera haber cierta implicación de sus sentimientos y acciones con una mujer como Gwendolen, que cada vez le resultaba más repugnante —cada vez más, incluso aunque hubiera dejado de verla—; pues el agrado y el desagrado pueden crecer con la meditación tan rápido como con la presencia más frecuente. Cualquier inquietud provocada por la idea de que lo que más preocupaba a Deronda pudiera ser algo alejado no solo de ella sino incluso de la amistad por su hermano, la habría apartado con estas preguntas: ¿Quién era ella sino una más de las que había compartido su generosa amabilidad junto con muchos otros? Y respecto a la amistad con su hermano, ¿no había empezado tarde para acabar pronto? Había mantenido otras amistades con anterioridad, y otras permanecerían después de que esta quedara truncada por la muerte inminente. Pero su desasosiego no había llegado al punto de ser consciente de ello, cosa que la habría avergonzado, por pretender tener un presuntuoso derecho sobre los sentimientos de Deronda. Que ella o cualquier otra persona pensara que él pudiera ser su prometido era algo que nunca se le había ocurrido; también era algo impensable por parte de

la señora Meyrick y las niñas, las cuales, igual que Mirah, consideraban que la intervención de Deronda en su vida era algo excepcional, y estaban tan asombradas por su misión como salvador y protector, que habrían considerado una ofensa insinuar que hubiera alguna otra relación con ella: un punto de vista que también había adoptado rápidamente Hans. Resulta un poco duro para algunos hombres convertirse en amantes, pues parecen hundirse. Pero precisamente por esta inocencia de los Meyrick era mayor la inquietud de Mirah. La primera ocasión apenas podía haber sido más trivial, pero preparó su naturaleza emotiva para acoger con más intensidad lo que vino después.

Ocurrió cuando a Anna Gascoigne, de visita en casa de los Meyrick, le hicieron hablar de su prima Gwendolen. El motivo de la visita era que Anna pudiera ver a Mirah; las tres chicas estaban en casa con su madre, y había, como era natural, un gran flujo de conversación entre seis criaturas femeninas, libres de la presencia de un modelo masculino distorsionador. Anna Gascoigne se sintió como en su casa con las chicas, que sabían lo que era tener un hermano, y ser consideradas generalmente como de menor importancia en el mundo; y ella había dicho a Rex que pensaba que la Universidad estaba muy bien, porque los hermanos hacían amigos cuyas familias no eran ricas ni espléndidas, pero que aún así (como la Universidad) estaban muy bien. Las Meyrick le parecían casi alarmantemente inteligentes, y les hizo muchas consultas sobre el modo de enseñar a Lotta, confiándoles que ella misma era la menos inteligente de su familia. Mirah había llegado tarde, y se encontró al entrar con un abanico completo de rostros jóvenes alrededor de la mesa del té —Hafiz, sentado en lo alto con grandes ojos vigilantes, observando toda la escena, contento con su ración de leche—.

—Imagínate lo que nos ha sorprendido, Mirah —dijo Kate—. Estábamos hablando del señor Deronda y de los Mallinger, y resulta que la señorita Gascoigne los conoce.

—Solo sabía de ellos —dijo Anna, que había enrojecido un poco por la excitación; lo que había oído y ahora veía de la encantadora judía era una novedad sorprendente para ella—. Ni siquiera los he visto. Pero hace unos meses, mi prima se casó con el sobrino de Sir Hugo Mallinger, el señor Grandcourt, que vivía en una de las casas de Sir Hugo, en Diplow, cerca de nosotros.

—¡Vaya! —exclamó Mab, aplaudiendo—. Algo tiene que salir de esto. ¿La señora Grandcourt, la duquesa Vandyke, es tu prima?

—Oh, sí, yo sí fue su dama de honor —dijo Anna—. Su mamá y la mía son hermanas. Mi tía era mucho más rica antes del año pasado; pero tanto ella como mamá perdieron toda su fortuna. Papá es un clérigo, ya saben, así que a nosotros no nos ha afectado, salvo que ya no tenemos carruaje ni damos cenas festivas, y a mí eso me gusta más. Pero fue muy triste para la pobre tía Davilow, pues no podía venirse a vivir con nosotros, puesto que tiene cuatro hijas además de Gwendolen; pero entonces, cuando ella se casó con el señor Grandcourt, ya no importó mucho, al ser él tan rico.

—¡Oh, esto de descubrir parentesco es maravilloso! —dijo Mab—. Es como juntar las piezas de un *puzzle* chino. Estoy seguro de que algo bueno tiene que salir de esto, pero no puedo decir el qué.

—Por Dios, Mab —dijo Amy—, todas las relaciones se ramifican. La única diferencia es que, resulta que conocemos a parte de la gente implicada. Pero este tipo de cosas pasa todos los días.

—Entonces ¿por qué insistes, Amy, en decir que el número nueve es tan maravilloso? —dijo Mab—. Estoy segura de que pasa todos los días. No importa, señorita Gascoigne; por favor, siga. ¿Y el señor Deronda? ¿No ha visto nunca al señor Deronda? Debe usted traerlo.

—No, no le he visto —dijo Anna—; pero estuvo en Diplow antes de que mi prima se casara, y he oído a mi tía hablar de él a papá. Me contó lo que han estado ustedes diciendo de él, solo que no tanto: quiero decir, sobre el señor Deronda viviendo con Sir Hugo Mallinger, y siendo tan bueno, decía ella. Hablamos bastante sobre todos lo que vienen a vivir cerca de Pennicote, porque es tan raro que venga alguien nuevo. Pero recuerdo que, cuando pregunté a Gwendolen qué pensaba del señor Deronda, me dijo: «No lo digas por ahí, Anna, pero creo que su pelo es oscuro». Esa fue su extraña forma de contestarme: era siempre tan vivaz. Es realmente maravilloso que llegue a oír hablar tanto de él, bien por el señor Hans al haber conocido a Rex, o gracias al placer de haberlas conocido a ustedes —Anna concluyó, mirando a la señora Meyrick con tímida finura.

—El placer también es nuestro; pero lo extraño habría sido que hubieras llegado a esta casa sin oír nada del señor Deronda, ¿verdad, Mirah? —dijo la señora Meyrick.

Mirah sonrió con aquiescencia, pero no tenía nada que decir. Sentía un descontento confuso por la mezcla de nombres e imágenes que había escuchado.

—Mi hijo llama a la señora Grandcourt la duquesa Vandyke —continuó la señora Meyrick, volviéndose hacia Anna—; cree que es tan llamativa y pintoresca.

—Sí —dijo Anna—. Gwendolen era siempre tan hermosa; la gente se enamoraba terriblemente de ella. Yo pensaba que era una pena, porque los hacía infelices.

—¿Y cuánto te gusta el señor Grandcourt, el amante feliz? —dijo la señora Meyrick, que a su modo, estaba tan interesada como Mab en los cotilleos que podía escuchar como viuda con hijas.

—Papá consintió que Gwendolen le aceptara, y mi tía dice que es muy generoso —dijo Anna, empezando con la virtuosa intención de reprimir sus propios sentimientos; pero luego, viéndose incapaz de resistir la tentación de aprovechar esa ocasión única de poder expresarlos libremente, continuó—: si no hubiera sido por eso, yo habría pensado que no es muy buena persona, más bien orgulloso, y nada alegre, como Gwendolen. Había pensado que alguien más joven y animado habría sido más adecuado para Gwendolen. Pero, tal vez el hecho de tener un hermano que nos parece mejor que nadie nos hace pensar peor de los demás.

—Espere a ver al señor Deronda —dijo Mab, asintiendo significativamente—. Ningún hermano está a su altura.

—Nuestros hermanos tienen que estar a la altura como maridos —dijo Kate, secamente—, porque ninguna mujer conseguirá al señor Deronda. Son ellas las que no están a su altura para casarse con él.

—Ninguna mujer debería querer casarse con él —dijo Mab, indignada—. Yo nunca lo haría. Imagínate descubrir que tuviera una cuenta de sastre y usara botas de gancho, como Hans. ¿Quién pensaría casarse con él?

—Yo lo he hecho —dijo Kate—. Cuando dibujé una boda para la portada de «Corazones y Diamantes», dibujé al novio con cierto parecido a él, e intenté buscar a una gran mujer que sirviera como su condesa, pero no vi más que pobres criaturas a su lado.

—Pues deberías haber visto a esta señora Grandcourt —dijo la señora Meyrick—. Hans dice que ella y el señor Deronda se animan el uno al otro cuando están juntos. Ella es alta y hermosa. Pero ya la conoces, Mirah, puedes decir algo de ella. ¿Qué opinas de la señora Grandcourt?

—Creo que es la *Princesa de Eboli* de *Don Carlos*[269] —dijo Mirah, con rápida intensidad. Buscaba una asociación en su mente que no la entendieran

los que la oían, una asociación con cierta actriz así como con el papel que desempeñaba.

Tu comparación es como un acertijo para mí, querida —dijo la señora Meyrick, sonriendo.

—Dijo que la señora Grandcourt era alta y hermosa —continuó Mirah, algo más pálida—. Eso es completamente cierto.

El rápido ojo y oído de la señora Meyrick detectó algo anormal, pero se lo explicó inmediatamente. Las damas finas habían herido a menudo a Mirah por los caprichos de sus formas y sus intenciones.

—La señora Grandcourt había pensado en recibir lecciones de Mirah —dijo volviéndose hacia Anna—. Pero muchas han hablado de querer lecciones, y luego no han encontrado tiempo. Las mujeres de moda tienen demasiado trabajo por hacer.

Y la charla prosiguió sin más insistencia sobre la *Princesa de Eboli*. Esa comparación se le escapó a Mirah de los labios por la punzada de dolor que sintió como nunca le había sucedido. La conversación, desde el principio, le había hecho revivir impresiones desagradables, y la sugerencia de la señora Meyrick de que la figura de Gwendolen estuviera al lado de la de Deronda tuvo el efecto punzante de una voz externa a ella, confirmando su convicción secreta de que esta mujer alta y hermosa tenía cierto control sobre el destino de él. La sensación de que hubiera caído sobre ella un jarro de agua fría le duró bastante tiempo.

Por la noche, al recostar su mejilla sobre el hombre de su hermano mientras estaba sentada a su lado, sentado él apoyándose en la cabecera de la cama por sus dificultades para respirar, le dijo:

—Esdras, ¿no te duele pensar que gran parte de la vida del señor Deronda no la conoces, que ha estado y se ha preocupado por personas que no son para nada como nosotros, quiero decir, que no son como tú?

—No, te aseguro que no —dijo Mardoqueo—. Es más, me alegro de que haya tenido una preparación que yo no tuve, y que sea un egipcio realizado. —Luego, dándose cuenta de que sus palabras hacían referencia a lo que su hermana todavía no podía entender, añadió—: Tengo que darle aún más, pues su tesoro es diferente del mío. Es algo dichoso entre los amigos.

Mirah reflexionó un poco.

—Aún así —dijo—, sería una prueba para tu estima por él que otra parte de su vida estuviera entremezclada con otra gente, alejada de ti, quiero decir en sus pensamientos, no solo alejada físicamente como ahora, y no solo por

un tiempo, sino continuamente. ¡Cómo soportarías eso! Nuestra religión nos manda soportar las cosas. ¿Pero cómo soportarías eso?

—Nada bien, hermana, nada bien; pero no ocurrirá nunca —dijo Mardoqueo, mirándola con una tierna sonrisa. Pensaba que el corazón de su hermana necesitaba que le consolase.

Mirah no dijo nada más. Reflexionando sobre la diferencia entre lo que pensaba su hermano y ella, se veía mezquina al compararse con él. ¿Por qué no podía sentirse completamente satisfecha con lo que satisfacía el juicio más cabal de su hermano? No encontraba más razón que una dolorosa sensación de incapacidad, ¿pero en qué? Vagas posibilidades que no podía definir, pero había un nombre y una figura que manchaban constantemente su visión. En esto residía el origen indefinible de la tristeza oculta que notó Hans al ver que disminuía su dulce naturalidad, esa pronta alegría en sus respuestas y en su sonrisa que había adquirido con la nueva sensación de libertad y seguridad, y que había aparecido como las margaritas recién abiertas y el claro canto de los pájaros tras la lluvia. Ella misma consideraba su inquietud como una especie de ingratitud y de insensibilidad hacia las grandes cosas que le habían dado en su nueva vida; y cada vez que cantaba con más energía de lo normal, era por la indignación contra su propia superficialidad. En ese estado dijo una vez: «¿Quieres que te diga qué diferencia hay entre tú y yo, Esdras? Tú eres un manantial en el desierto, y yo soy la cáscara de una bellota; las aguas del cielo me llenan, pero el más mínimo movimiento me deja vacía».

—¿Cómo? ¿Qué te ha agitado? —dijo Mardoqueo. Habló de esta forma arcaica que utilizaba habitualmente con su hermana y con los niños de los Cohen[270].

—Pensamientos —dijo Mirah—; pensamientos que llegan como la brisa y me conmocionan: gente mala, cosas malas, desgracias, y cómo podrían afectar a mi vida.

—Debemos tomar nuestra parte, Mirah. Está allí. ¿Sobre quién la descargaremos para librarnos de ella?

El único signo voluntario que ella hizo de sus preocupaciones interiores fue esta alusión distante.

Capítulo 53

> Mi desolación comienza a engendrarme una mejor vida.
>
> SHAKESPEARE, *Antonio y Cleopatra*[271]

EN EL INTERVALO ENTRE LA PRIMERA ENTREVISTA DE DERONDA CON SU MADRE Y LA siguiente, transcurrió solo un día, durante el cual ella le envió un mensaje diciendo que no se encontraba todavía lo suficientemente bien para recibirle de nuevo; pero a la tercera mañana, se encontró con una nota que decía: «Marcho hoy mismo. Ven a verme inmediatamente».

Fue conducido a la misma sala de antes; pero estaba más oscurecida con persianas y cortinas. La Princesa no estaba allí, pero acabó entrando, envuelta en un vestido suave de seda, de color naranja oscuro, con la cabeza de nuevo flotando por encima de un lazo negro, y enseñando sus brazos desnudos a través de las anchas mangas. Su rostro parecía incluso más impresionante en la luz sombría, sus ojos más grandes, y sus rasgos más vigorosos. Recordaba a una bruja que extendiera su hermosa mano para ofrecer una poción de la juventud para los demás, pero avergonzada de usarla también para ella, al tener todavía bastante juventud.

Puso sus brazos en los hombros de su hijo inmediatamente, y le besó en ambas mejillas, luego se sentó entre los cojines con un aire de firmeza y dignidad segura, no con la incomodidad que mostró en su primera entrevista, y le dijo a Deronda que se sentara a su lado. Este obedeció, diciendo:

—Estás más tranquila ahora, espero.

—Sí, vuelvo a estar tranquila. ¿Hay algo más que quieras preguntarme? —dijo, como si fuera una reina más que una madre.

—¿Puedo hallar la casa en Génova donde vivías con mi abuelo? —dijo Deronda.

—No —respondió, con un movimiento despreciativo de su brazo—, ha sido derruida, no la encontrarás. Pero lo que quieras sobre mi familia y dónde vivió mi padre en diversas ocasiones, lo encontrarás todo entre los papeles de la cómoda, mejor de lo que yo pueda contarte. Mi padre, ya te lo dije, era un médico. Mi madre era una Morteira[272]. Yo oía todas esas cosas sin

escucharlas. Las encontrarás todas. Nací entre ellos sin quererlo. Les abandoné tan pronto como pude.

Deronda trató de esconder sus sentimientos doloridos, y dijo:

—Solo quisiera saber lo que te produciría satisfacción contarme.

—Creo que te he contado todo lo que se me podría pedir —dijo la Princesa, con aspecto frío y meditativo. Parecía como si hubiera agotado toda su emoción en su anterior entrevista. El hecho era, se había dicho a sí misma, que «ya lo he hecho todo. Lo he confesado todo. No pasaré por lo mismo otra vez. Me ahorraré la conmoción». Y estaba actuando bajo ese esquema.

Pero para la naturaleza de Deronda el momento era cruel; el anhelo filial de su vida se había convertido en un peregrinaje decepcionante hacia un santuario donde ya no estaban los símbolos sagrados. Parecía que toda la feminidad que se hallaba en falta en ella estaba en él cuando dijo con la voz algo trémula:

—¿Así que vamos a separarnos y no sabré nunca nada de ti?

—Es mejor así —dijo la Princesa, en una voz más suave y dulce—. Solo te crearía un fuerte deber, incluso si fueras capaz de aceptar el papel de mi hijo. No me amarías. No lo niegues —dijo bruscamente, alzando la mano—. Sé lo que es la verdad. No te gusta lo que hice. Estás enfadada conmigo. Crees que te privé de algo. Estás de parte de tu abuelo, y siempre me condenarás en tu corazón.

Deronda se hallaba inhabilitado por el silencio. Se apartó de ella, prefiriendo estar de pie, si tenía que obedecer esa imperiosa prohibición de cualquier tipo de ternura. Pero su madre le miraba con una nueva admiración en sus ojos, y dijo:

—Te equivocas al enfadarte conmigo. Eres mejor gracias a lo que hice. —Tras una pausa, añadió bruscamente—: Y ahora dime qué es lo que harás.

—¿Te refieres ahora, inmediatamente? —dijo Deronda—, ¿o al resto de mi vida?

—Me refiero al futuro. ¿Qué diferencia supondrá para ti que te haya hablado de tu nacimiento?

—Una muy gran diferencia —dijo Deronda, enfáticamente—. Apenas puedo pensar en algo que significara una diferencia mayor.

—¿Qué harás entonces? —dijo la Princesa, con más agudeza—. ¿Convertirte en lo que fue tu abuelo, ser lo que él deseaba que fueras, hacerte judío como él?

—Eso es imposible. Nunca podré deshacerme del efecto de mi educación. Las tendencias cristianas de las que he estado rodeado no podrán apartarse nunca de mi mente —dijo Deronda, con una tenacidad creciente en su tono de voz—. Pero considero mi deber (me impulsan mis sentimientos) a identificarme, en la medida de lo posible, con el pueblo del que provengo, y si veo que puedo hacer algo por ellos, aunque tenga que dar mi vida y mi alma, lo haré.

Su madre tenía los ojos fijos en él, sorprendida y especulando, examinando su rostro como si pensara que observándole atentamente podría interpretar el difícil lenguaje que mostraba. Él le sostuvo la mirada firmemente, sustentado por una oposición decidida, que era la expresión de su yo más pleno. Ella se inclinó un poco hacia él, y dijo, con énfasis:

—Estás enamorado de una judía.

Deronda enrojeció y dijo:

—Mis razones serían independientes de un hecho así.

—Yo sé más. He visto lo que son los hombres —dijo la Princesa, perentoriamente—. Dime la verdad. Es una judía que no aceptará a nadie que no sea judío. Hay muchas así —añadió, con un toque de desprecio.

Deronda no quiso responder por lo que todos nosotros ya sabemos que pasa cuando nos enfrentamos a personas demasiado seguras de sus interpretaciones y que no cambiarán por mucho que les digamos. Pero además de esto, sentía una repugnancia a afirmar o negar el punto en cuestión. Permaneció en silencio, y entonces, ella dijo:

—La amas como tu padre me amaba, y ella te arrastra como yo arrastraba a mi padre.

Esas palabras conmovieron la imaginación filial de Deronda, y la ternura de su mirada fue interpretada por su madre como un asentimiento. Ella prosiguió con pasión creciente:

—Pero le llevé por otro camino. Y ahora tu abuelo se está vengando.

—Madre —dijo Deronda, a modo de queja—, no pensemos de esta manera. Admito que pueda tener cierto beneficio de la educación que escogiste para mí. Prefiero apreciar el beneficio con gratitud que pensar con resentimiento en la ofensa. Creo que habría sido lo correcto que hubiera crecido con la conciencia de ser judío, pero debe haberme hecho siempre un bien tener una enseñanza y una visión lo más amplias posibles. Y ahora, has restaurado mi herencia (los acontecimientos han traído una restitución más

plena de lo que podías haber hecho), has sido librada de robar a mi pueblo mi servicio y a mí mi deber: ¿no puedes considerarlo desde este punto de vista?

Deronda hizo una pausa en su súplica: su madre le miraba escuchándolo, como si la cadencia de su voz le llevara a otro mundo, pero movió la cabeza lentamente. Él lo intentó de nuevo, incluso con más energía:

—Me has dicho que buscabas lo que creías que era lo mejor para mí: abre tu corazón con tolerancia y amor hacia mi abuelo, que buscó lo que creía mejor para ti.

—No, para mí no —dijo, sacudiendo la cabeza con una negación más decidida, y doblando los brazos—. Ya te lo dije, él nunca pensó en su hija más que como un instrumento. Como yo tenía intenciones opuestas a las suyas, me relegó al ostracismo y me torturó. Si esa es la ley justa para el mundo, no diré que la comparto. Si mis actos fueron malos, si es Dios quien se está vengando, haciéndome entregar lo que una vez me quedé, quien me está castigando porque engañé a mi padre y no le avisé de que contradiría su confianza, bien, ya lo he dicho todo. He hecho lo que he podido. Y tu alma lo acepta. Eso es suficiente. Después de todo he sido el instrumento que mi padre quería: «Deseo un nieto que tenga un verdadero corazón judío. Cada judío debería criar a su familia como si esperara que de ella naciera un Salvador».

Al pronunciar estas últimas frases, la Princesa encogió sus ojos, agitó su cabeza hacia arriba y hacia abajo, y habló lentamente con una nueva voz, como si estuviera citando algo sin quererlo.

—¿Eran esas las palabras de mi abuelo? —dijo Deronda.

—Sí, sí, y las encontrarás escritas. Yo quise frustrarle —dijo la Princesa en un repentino arrebato pasional como el que había mostrado en la entrevista anterior. Luego añadió más calmada—: Quieres que ame lo que he odiado desde el tiempo en que estaba tan alta —aquí alzó su mano a una yarda del suelo—. Eso no puede ser. Pero ¿qué importa? Su yugo ha estado sobre mí, tanto si me gustaba como si no. Tú eres el nieto que quería. Hablas como hacen los hombres, como si te creyeras sabio. ¿Qué significa todo ello?

Su tono era abrupto y desdeñoso. Deronda, apenado, y bajo la solemne urgencia del momento, tuvo que recordarse los lazos que les unían, para que sus palabras no sonaran crueles. Comenzó en un profundo tono suplicante:

—Madre, no digas que me creo sabio. Estamos en medio de infinitud de dificultades. No veo otra forma de ver la luz que siendo sincero, no reteniendo hechos que puedan, que deberían, acarrear obligaciones, que deberían ser la

única guía hacia el deber. No es ninguna sorpresa que esos hechos lleguen a revelarse a pesar de que se intente mantenerlos ocultos. Lo normal es que lo que ha sido preparado por generaciones triunfe sobre las estratagemas que no tengan más finalidad que la propia satisfacción de uno mismo. Tu voluntad era fuerte, pero la confianza de mi abuelo que tu aceptaste y no realizaste (lo que llamas su yugo) es la expresión de algo mayor, con raíces más profundas y extensas, ligado a los cimientos de lo sagrado para todos los hombres. Renunciaste a mí (aún hoy me destierras) como hijo —hubo un cambio involuntario de indignación en la voz de Deronda—. Pero ese Algo más potente ha decidido que seré más aún el nieto que quisiste aniquilar.

Su madre le miraba fijamente, y de nuevo su rostro reunió admiración. Tras un momento de silencio dijo, en un tono bajo y persuasivo:

—Siéntate otra vez —y él obedeció, poniéndose a su lado. Ella puso su mano en su hombro y continuó:

—Me rechazas. Bien, soy la perdedora. Y estás enfadado porque te destierro. ¿Qué podrías hacer por mí más que hartarte de tu propia paciencia? Tu madre es una mujer destrozada. Mi sensación de la vida es poco más que una sensación de lo que fue, salvo cuando aparece el dolor. Me reprochas que te abandoné. Estaba contenta sin ti por entonces. Ahora has vuelto a mí, y no me puedes alegrar. ¿Tienes en ti el maldito espíritu judío? ¿No eres capaz de perdonarme? ¿Te alegrarás al pensar que he sido castigada porque no fui una madre judía para ti?

—¿Cómo puedes preguntarme eso? —dijo Deronda, en tono de queja—. ¿No te he implorado que me admitas al menos ahora como hijo? Mi pena es que pienses que no puedo consolarte. Daría todo lo que tengo por aliviar tu angustia.

—No darías nada —dijo su madre, con la presteza de la inquietud—. Tú serás feliz. Dejarás que piense que eres feliz. Yo no te he hecho daño. No tienes motivos para maldecirme. Sentirás por mí lo que sienten los que rezan oraciones por los muertos, desearás que pueda librarme de todo sufrimiento, de todo castigo. Y yo te veré a ti en vez de ver a tu abuelo. ¿Le sobrevendrá alguna desgracia porque en once años no hice ningún *Kadish*[273] por él? No lo sé: si tú crees que el *Kadish* me ayudará, dilo, dilo. Te interpondrás entre mí y los muertos. Cuando yo esté en tu mente, tendrás el aspecto que tienes ahora, siempre como si fueras un hijo cariñoso, siempre como si yo hubiera sido una madre cariñosa.

Parecía decidida a que su inquietud no la derrotara, pero él notó que le temblaba la mano sobre su hombro. Todas las palabras encerraban una compasión muy profunda. Con un rostro suplicante, la rodeó con su brazo y le acercó suavemente la cabeza a la suya. Estuvieron sentados así por unos momentos. Luego, alzó ella de nuevo su rostro y se levantó de su asiento dando un gran suspiro, como si al expulsar el aire expulsara también un gran peso de pensamientos. Deronda, de pie enfrente de ella, sentía que llegaba el momento de la despedida. Pero a su madre le vino uno de sus rápidos cambios de tema.

—¿Es ella hermosa? —dijo abruptamente.

—¿Quién? —dijo Deronda, mudando de color.

—La mujer que amas.

No era un momento para explayarse en reflexiones. Se vio obligado a decir:

—Sí.

—¿No es ambiciosa?

—No, creo que no.

—¿No es alguien que deba seguir su propio camino?

—Creo que su naturaleza no está preparada para grandes reivindicaciones.

—¿No es así? —dijo la Princesa, sacando de su cartera un dibujo en miniatura adornado en su contorno con joyas, y sosteniéndolo ante su hijo. Era ella misma en todo el esplendor de su juventud, y mientras Deronda la miraba con admiración y tristeza, ella dijo—: ¿No tenía un buen derecho a ser algo más que una mera hija y una madre? La voz y el genio ligaban con la cara. Aunque lo demás estuviera mal, reconoce que tenía derecho a ser una artista, por mucho que la voluntad de mi padre estuviera en contra. Mi naturaleza me lo permitía.

—Reconozco eso —dijo Deronda, mirando al dibujo y luego a su rostro, que incluso en su palidez desgastada tenía una expresión de fuerza viva más allá de lo que el lápiz podía mostrar.

—¿Llevarás el retrato? —dijo la Princesa, más amablemente—. Si ella es una mujer afable, enséñale a pensar bien de mí.

—Estoy agradecido por el retrato —dijo Deronda—, pero debería decir que no estoy seguro de que la que amo me ame a mí. No le he dicho nada.

—¿Quién y qué es? —dijo la madre. La pregunta parecía una orden.

—Fue educada como cantante para los escenarios —dijo Deronda, con cierta desgana interior—. Su padre la apartó a temprana edad de su madre, y

su vida ha sido desgraciada. Es muy joven, solo tiene veinte años. Su padre quería educarla en la indiferencia, incluso hacia su propio origen judío, pero ella volcó todo su afecto en la memoria de su madre y la amistad de su pueblo.

—Ah, como tú. Está unida a un judaísmo que no conoce —dijo la Princesa perentoriamente—. Eso es poesía, podría servir para una ópera. ¿Le gusta su vida de artista? ¿Vale como cantante?

—Su canto es exquisito. Pero su voz no sirve para los escenarios. Creo que la vida de artista le ha acabado repugnando.

—Vaya, está hecha para ti, entonces. Sir Hugo dijo que tú estabas totalmente en contra de convertirte en un cantante, y veo que no permitirías nunca diluir tu personalidad en la de una mujer, como hizo tu padre.

—Te repito —dijo Deronda con énfasis—, te repito que no tengo ninguna certeza de que ella me ame, de que exista la posibilidad de que podamos estar unidos para siempre. Puede que otras cosas, asuntos dolorosos, se interpongan. Siempre he pensado que debía prepararme para renunciar a ese proyecto, no albergar esperanzas. Pero supongo que me ocurre también con la felicidad en general. Tanto si viene como si no, uno debe prepararse para seguir adelante sin ella.

—¿Eso piensas? —dijo su madre, poniendo las manos sobre sus hombros, y examinando detenidamente su rostro, mientras hablaba en un tono bajo y meditativo, con breves pausas entre sus frases—: ¡Pobre chico!… Me pregunto qué habría pasado si te hubiera mantenido conmigo… si tu corazón hubiera buscado las tradiciones antiguas y te hubieras puesto en mi contra… nos habríamos peleado… tu abuelo habría estado en ti… y habrías dificultado mi vida, al crecer desde las viejas raíces.

—Creo que mi afecto habría estado por encima de cualquier pelea —dijo Deronda, cada vez más entristecido—, y eso no te habría dificultado nada, sin duda te habría enriquecido la vida.

—No entonces, no entonces… yo no lo quería entonces… habría sido feliz ahora —dijo la madre, con amarga melancolía—, si hubiera podido ser feliz con algo.

—Pero quieres a tus otros hijos, y ellos te quieren, ¿verdad? —dijo Deronda ansiosamente.

—Oh, sí —contestó, como si respondiera a una pregunta evidente, a la vez que doblaba los brazos de nuevo—. Pero —añadió en un tono más profundo —, no soy una mujer que sepa amar. Esa es la verdad. Amar es un talento, y

yo no lo tengo. Hay quien me ha amado, y yo me lo he tomado como una actuación. Sé muy bien lo que el amor hace a los hombres y a las mujeres: los somete. Toma al otro como una prolongación de uno, encerrándolo en uno mismo —señaló su propio vientre—. Nunca me he sometido voluntariamente a ningún hombre. Los hombres se han sometido a mí.

—Tal vez el hombre que se sometió fue el más feliz de los dos —dijo Deronda, no con una sonrisa, sino con una seria y triste sensación de la privación de su madre.

—Tal vez, pero yo *era* feliz, durante unos años fui feliz. Si no hubiera temido a la derrota y al fracaso, habría continuado. Hice mal mis cálculos. ¿Y luego? Se acabó todo. ¡Otra vida! Los hombres hablan de «la otra vida» como si solo empezara al otro lado de la tumba. Hace tiempo que entré en otra vida. —Al decir las últimas palabras alzó sus brazos de forma que quedaron desnudos hasta los codos, sus cejas se contrajeron en un pliegue profundo, sus ojos se cerraron, su voz era más suave: en sus prendas de color fuego intenso, parecía un visitante de ensueño proveniente de alguna región de ultratumba.

Las emociones de Deronda llegaron a un grado de agudeza en que ya no pudo controlarse más. Dio un hondo suspiro. Su madre, abrió los ojos, y reposando de nuevo las manos sobre sus hombros, dijo:

—Adiós, hijo mío, adiós. Ya no sabremos más el uno del otro. Bésame.

Le rodeó el cuello con sus brazos, y se dieron un beso cada uno.

Deronda no supo cómo salió de la sala. Se sentía un hombre más viejo. Todos sus anhelos y ansiedades infantiles sobre su madre habían desparecido. Había pasado por una trágica experiencia que iba a enaltecer su vida para siempre y a profundizar el significado de los actos por los cuales se iba a ligar a los demás.

Capítulo 54

El reacio cerebro
a menudo nos engaña con lo que no es; y confiamos
en la imaginación con fantasías tales
que la lengua no se atreve a poner en palabras:
los que no tienen palabras, su horror les hace incapaces
para los ojos de la mente.

SHELLEY[274]

MADONNA PIA, CUYO MARIDO, SINTIÉNDOSE OFENDIDO POR ELLA, LA LLEVÓ A SU castillo entre los llanos pantanosos de la Maremma[275] y se libró de ella dejándola allí, es una figura patética del Purgatorio de Dante, entre los pecadores que se arrepintieron en el último momento y desean ser recordados con compasión por sus paisanos. Sabemos poco sobre los motivos de descontento mutuo entre la pareja sienesa, pero podemos inferir con cierta seguridad que el marido nunca fue un compañero muy agradable, y que sobre los llanos de la Maremma, sus formas desagradables destacaban como trasfondo; por lo que en su deseo de castigar al máximo a su mujer, la naturaleza de las cosas estaba tan en su contra que al librarse de ella no pudo evitar que el alivio fuera mutuo. Y así, sin ser duros con la pobre dama toscana, que tuvo su liberación muy pronto, uno puede tender a compadecerse menos de ella que de la que conocemos más, de Gwendolen, que en vez de librarse de sus errores terrestres y ser purificada de su efecto en el Purgatorio, se encuentra en una de las situaciones más enredada posible, como esos ovillos endemoniados que están más embrollados por dentro que por fuera, y que a menudo hacen que la tortura interior sea desproporcionada comparada con lo que se ve como causa exterior.

Al llevar con él a su mujer en viaje en yate, Grandcourt no tenía intención alguna de librarse de ella; al contrario, quería asegurarse todavía más que ella era de él, que hacía lo que él quería, y que ella lo viera también así. Además, era muy aficionado a ir en yate: le permitía no hacer nada, no ser molestado por requerimientos sociales, y eso encajaba con su manera de ser, y en absoluto lo consideraba como un equivalente a la monotonía de la Maremma. Tenía sus razones para apartar a Gwendolen del mundo, pero no parecían oscuras. Sospechaba un creciente espíritu de oposición en ella, y lo que

suscitó en él la inclinación sentimental que ella no había podido ocultar por Deronda era lo que en otro hombre habría definido como celos. Pero en él parecía simplemente una resolución de poner fin a esas tonterías como había hecho con esa visita preconcertada con Deronda que había adivinado e interrumpido.

Y Grandcourt habría alegado que estaba perfectamente justificado en cuidar que su mujer realizara las obligaciones que había aceptado. Su matrimonio era un contrato en el que claramente había obtenido ella todas las ventajas, y era a través de esas ventajas que su marido quería ejercer su poder para impedirle que realizara cualquier acto ofensivo o que tuviera una conducta inadecuada. Sabía perfectamente que ella no se había casado con él —no había superado su repugnancia a ciertos hechos— por amor; se la había ganado por el rango y el lujo que le había otorgado, y que ella había acogido; él había cumplido con su parte del contrato.

Y Gwendolen, como sabemos, era perfectamente consciente de la situación. No podía disculparse diciendo que había una parte tácita del contrato, a saber, que ella quería conservar su libertad y tomar sus propias decisiones. Con toda su temprana indulgencia en su disposición para dominar, no era una de esas mujeres cortas de mira que consideran todas las demandas egoístas de su vida como derechos, y cada requerimiento que les hacen a ellas como ofensas. Tenía la conciencia bien arraigada, y el proceso del purgatorio había empezado para ella en la tierra: sabía que se había equivocado.

Pero intentemos comprender ahora el alma de esta joven criatura, como se consideraba ella, con el Mediterráneo azul separándola del mundo, en la diminuta isla de tablones que era el yate, dominada por un marido al que se había vendido y al que había pagado el precio estricto —no, había pagado más que lo que se habría atrevido a pedir para la manutención de su madre: un marido al que había vendido su honestidad y sentido de la justicia, para que él las mantuviera ahogadas en el silencio, y quedaran atrapadas y arrastradas como testigos de lo que él haría, sin remordimientos—.

¿De qué tenía que quejarse? El yate era precioso; la cabina era perfecta, olía a cedro, acolchada con cojines de seda y agrandada por los espejos; la tripulación encajaba como un juguete elegante, uno de ellos tenía incluso rizos, además de una complexión bronceada y hermosos dientes; y allí no estaba el señor Lush, pues había vuelto a Inglaterra tan pronto había inspeccionado que todo estuviera a punto a bordo. Además, a Gwendolen le gustaba el mar: no la ponía enferma; y observar las jarcias de la nave y prever

los ajustes necesarios era un tipo de diversión que podría haber satisfecho su actividad y su señorío imaginario; el tiempo era estupendo, y bordeaban la costa hacia el sur, donde incluso la arcilla cuarteada y llena de surcos formados por la lluvia adoptaba el aspecto de gemas con sombras púrpuras, y donde se puede flotar despierto entre colores azules en un ensueño que el mundo ha forjado con pena.

¿Pero qué puede saciar esa necesidad del corazón que deprime la vista ante la belleza y convierte la paz dulcemente perfumada en una opresión? ¿Qué tipo de paraíso musulmán calmaría la terrible furia de repulsa moral y resistencia amilanada que, como una pena devoradora que se intensifica hasta la tortura, concentra la mente en esa desgracia venenosa? Mientras Gwendolen, entronada en sus cojines por la noche, y observando la gloria del mar y del cielo, mimándola como si estuviera rodeada de amor ilimitado, esperaba que Grandcourt, en su ir y venir, no fuera a pararse cerca de ella, no fuera a mirarla o hablarle, había una mujer, que bajo un cielo humeante, y obligada a considerar el precio de los huevos para preparar su comida, estaba a la escucha de la música de unos pasos humanos que eliminarían todo riesgo de su muestra de alegría; había una pareja, que inclinados con sus mejillas juntas sobre un pequeño trabajo hecho por uno de ellos y admirado por el otro, consideraban las ganancias que les permitirían unas vacaciones entre aulagas y brezo.

¿Tenía Grandcourt la más mínima sospecha de lo que ocurría en el corazón de su mujer? Sabía que no le amaba, ¿pero le hacía eso falta? Estaba bajo su poder, y no estaba acostumbrado a autocomplacerse, como hacen algunas personas alegres de ánimo, con la convicción de ser muy amadas. Pero lo que estaba muy lejos de imaginarse era que ella tuviera una especial repulsión hacia él personalmente. ¿Cómo podría? Él mismo sabía lo que era la repulsa personal —nadie mejor—; conocía lo brutos que eran sus compañeros de raza, tanto masculinos como femeninos; las familiaridades odiosas que tenían, las sonrisas afectadas, las maneras de lucir sus pañuelos, los vestidos, las aguas de lavanda, los ojos saltones, y las torpes ideas para hacerse agradables mediante observaciones no requeridas. En esta visión crítica de la humanidad había una afinidad entre él y Gwendolen antes de casarse, y sabemos que a ella le habían atraído sus refinadas negaciones. Por eso él entendía su repulsa hacia Lush. ¿Pero cómo iba a entender o concebir su presente repulsa hacia Henleigh Grandcourt? Algunos hombres llegan a creer, y no solo a decir, que no existe un mundo externo; otros pocos se creen

repulsivos para una mujer sin que se les haya dicho claramente. Pero Grandcourt no pertenecía a este cuerpo excéntrico de pensadores. Había tenido razones toda su vida para enorgullecerse de su atractivo, y de considerarse la antítesis de los hombres que —era evidente al verlos—, debían ser repugnantes para una mujer de gusto. No tenía ni idea de lo que era la repulsión moral, y no podría haberse creído, si se lo hubieran dicho, que puede haber un resentimiento y una aversión que hiciera progresivamente a la belleza más detestable que la fealdad, por la exasperación que produce esa virtud externa por la que se hace alarde de las cosas odiosas o se manifiesta una superioridad altiva.

¿Cómo iba, por tanto, Grandcourt, a adivinar lo que pasaba por dentro de Gwendolen?

El comportamiento que tenían entre ellos no escandalizaba a nadie —ni siquiera a la criada extranjera, a la que habían cogido porque garantizaba que no se mareaba en el barco; ni al experto ayuda de cámara de Grandcourt: y aún menos a la pintoresca tripulación, que los consideraban como el modelo de una pareja de la alta sociedad. Su compañerismo consistía principalmente en un silencio bien alimentado. Grandcourt no hacía observaciones graciosas de las que Gwendolen pudiera rechazar reírse, ni había charlas en las que pudieran darse pequeñas ocasiones de disputa. Él se mostraba perfectamente cortés colocándole una prenda adicional cuando lo necesitaba, y ella no podía caer en la vulgaridad de aceptar o rechazar tal cortesía con rudeza.

Grandcourt plantaba su telescopio y decía: «Hay una plantación de cañas de azúcar al pie de esa roca; ¿te gustaría mirarla?».

Gwendolen decía: «Sí, por favor», recordando que debía intentarlo e interesarse por las cañas de azúcar como algo ajeno a sus asuntos personales. Luego, Grandcourt paseaba de un lado a otro fumando, deteniéndose ocasionalmente para señalar a un marinero en el horizonte, y al final se sentaba y observaba a Gwendolen con su estrecha mirada inamovible, como si fuera parte del yate; mientras, ella, consciente de ser observada, se hacía la ingenua para no encontrarse con sus ojos. En la comida, él solía remarcar que la fruta se estaba volviendo rancia, y que debían parar en algún sitio a por más; o al observar que ella no bebía vino, le preguntaba si le gustaría el de otro tipo mejor. Una dama estaba obligada a responder a esas cosas adecuadamente; e incluso aunque no le hubiera importado discutir con Grandcourt sobre otros temas, discutir con Grandcourt era imposible; habría sido lo mismo que enfadarse con una peligrosa serpiente colgada sin permiso

en su cabina. ¿Y qué tipo de disputa puede empezar en un yate una mujer con cierto orgullo y dignidad?

Grandcourt tenía una intensa satisfacción en mantener cautiva de esta manera a su mujer; daba a su vida, a una pequeña escala, una representación real y una publicidad en la que no había nada de familiar, y todo el mundo debía hacer lo que se esperaba de ellos, por mucho que protestasen por dentro, añadiendo esa protesta (mantenida estrictamente en privado) más amargura al despotismo.

Para Gwendolen, que incluso en la libertad de su tiempo de soltera, había visto destellos muy débiles de heroísmo o de excelsitud, el medio que ahora aparecía por todas partes ante su vista era este marido y su relación con él. Los seres más cercanos a nosotros, tanto si los queremos como si los odiamos, son muy a menudo nuestros intérpretes del mundo, y un caballero o una dama frívolos que al verlos pasar lamentamos considerarlos como moneda de curso legal para un ser humano, pueden representar una teoría melancólica de la vida para la mente de aquellos que viven con ellos —como un trozo de cristal amarillo y ondulado que distorsiona las formas y los colores—. Sus frases triviales, sus modelos insignificantes, sus bajas sospechas, su terrible aburrimiento, puede estar convirtiendo la vida de otro en algo no mejor que un paseo por un panteón de ídolos horrorosos. Gwendolen se hallaba ante ese tipo de ventanal ante ella, y le afectaba tanto lo distante como lo cercano. Algunas mujeres desgraciadas se consuelan con la posibilidad de convertirse en madres; pero Gwendolen sentía que desear un niño habría sido como poner la guinda en la ofensa de la que ella misma era culpable. De hecho, le aterrorizaba llegar a ser madre. No fue la imagen del dulce retoño de una nueva vida la que le libró de la monotonía de su hastío: fue una imagen de otro tipo. En sus estados irritables y fluctuantes de desesperación, llegaban destellos de esperanza en la forma de un posible accidente. Darle vueltas a la benignidad de un accidente era una forma de refugiarse de otras tentaciones peores.

La amargura del odio cuesta tanto de ser apercibida como el incremento del amor devoto, y no solo lo parece sino que realmente está fuera de toda relación directa con cualquier causa externa. La pasión tiene una naturaleza como la de una semilla, y encuentra su alimento en su interior, tendiendo a un predominio que determina que todas las corrientes confluyan en ella, y toda la vida le paga tributo. Y la forma más intensa del odio es la que está arraigada en el miedo, que arrastra al silencio y conduce a la vehemencia hacia una

reivindicación constructiva, una destrucción imaginaria del objeto detestado, algo parecido a los ritos ocultos de venganza con los que los perseguidos han encontrado un oscuro desahogo para su rabia, y han aliviado su sufrimiento en el mutismo. Tales ritos ocultos fluían en secreto en el interior de Gwendolen, pero sin que la aliviaran, sino más bien provocándole un terror combativo. Junto con el miedo a su marido había crecido el miedo a sí misma, que la apremiaba a escapar de las imágenes que la perseguían y acorralaban. La visión del error de su pasado y a qué la había conducido le acompañaba con una sensación terrible cada vez que trataba de imaginar una forma de escapar y recuperar su libertad, como la que había hecho casándose. Además, se había acostumbrado a considerar la impresión que producirían en Deronda todos sus actos: cualquier momento de alivio que sintiera, no podía separarlo del juicio que formaría él de ella. En toda su relación no podía aferrarse a una sola palabra de lisonja, de indulgencia, de dependencia en su favor que pudiera debilitar su poder sobre ella (en este sentido el esfuerzo de Deronda había quedado compensado); y entre las tristes incertidumbres de su vida desgraciada, los únicos remedios que quedaban en su mente —no, el remedio que quedaba en su sentimiento por él, era su única esperanza—. A ella le parecía que era un ángel terrible, al que no le podía ocultar ningún hecho para conseguir su aprobación: tal como habían ido las cosas, sentía confianza en él, pues su poder sobre ella había comenzado al experimentar ella un descontento de sí misma que solo podía ser satisfecho con un cambio genuino. Pero no podía ocultarle nada: la visión de lo que tenía que tener miedo tomó más decisivamente que nunca la forma de una hazaña impulsiva, cometida como en un sueño del que despertaba inmediatamente y encontraba que los efectos eran reales a pesar de que las imágenes habían sido falsas: encontraba la muerte en sus manos, pero en lugar de oscuridad, la luz; en lugar de odio satisfecho, el desmayo de la culpabilidad; en lugar de libertad, la parálisis por un nuevo terror, la cara blanca de un cadáver del que intentaba huir una y otra vez y que siempre volvía. Recordó las palabras de Deronda: continuamente se presentaban en su pensamiento:

«Convierta su miedo en una protección. Mantenga su temor fijo en la idea de incrementar su remordimiento… Considere su miedo como una defensa. Es como oír las cosas demasiado pronto. Puede provocar consecuencias pasionales».

Y así era. En la conciencia de Gwendolen se hallaban la tentación y el miedo, y se observaban como dos pálidos fantasmas, cada uno viéndose

reflejado en el otro, cada uno obstruido por su propia imagen; y mientras, en su interior contemplaba las apariciones y anhelaba librarse de ellas.

Las oraciones inarticuladas, no más definidas que un sollozo, le arrastraban a menudo hacia un largo silencio, interrumpido solo por la respiración de su marido, las olas salpicando el barco o el crujido de los mástiles; pero si alguna vez pensaba en ayuda definitiva, esta tomaba la forma de la presencia y las palabras de Deronda, de la compasión que tenía por ella, de la orientación que podría darle. Era después de las tentaciones demoníacas en las que se imaginaba con labios blancos, ojos vacíos y manos asesinas, que llegaban los mejores momentos de sollozo interior de salvación, y se quedaba con los ojos abiertos en los que las lágrimas que saltaban parecían una bendición, y el pensamiento: «No me importa si puedo evitar ser malvada», parecía una respuesta a la oración indefinida.

Así que pasaron los días, que los llevaron, entre brisas agradables, más allá de las Islas Baleares, y luego de Cerdeña, y finalmente, al cambiar ligeramente y sugerir tomar rumbo al norte, volvieron de nuevo hacia Córcega. Pero esta existencia apacible, con sus aparentes influencias pacificadoras, le resultaba tan desagradable a Gwendolen como una pesadilla.

—¿Cuánto tiempo vamos a estar en el yate? —se aventuró a preguntar un día que habían amarrado en Ajaccio, y el mero hecho de un cambio al tomar tierra le había aliviado de algunos de los pensamientos que parecían ahora aferrarse a las mismas jarcias del barco, mezclados con el aire en la cabina de seda roja de abajo, y que hacían odioso el olor del mar.

—¿Qué otra cosa podemos hacer? —dijo Grandcourt—. Yo no estoy cansado. No veo por qué no podemos estar fuera el tiempo que queramos. De esta forma uno se aburre menos. ¿Y adónde irías tú? Estoy harto de ver lugares en el extranjero. Y ya tendremos bastante de Rylands. ¿Preferirías estar en Ryelands?

—Oh, no —dijo Gwendolen con indiferencia, pensando que todos los sitios donde estuviera con su marido serían igual de horroroso—. Solo me preguntaba cuánto tiempo querrías estar así.

—Me gusta más ir en yate que hacer otra cosa —dijo Grandcourt—; y no pude ir el año pasado. Me imagino que estás empezando a cansarte. Las mujeres son tan detestablemente caprichosas. Esperan que todo el mundo ceda y hagan lo que ellas quieren.

—¡Oh, no, querido! —dijo Gwendolen, dejando traslucir su desprecio a través de un tono agudo—. Nunca he esperado que cedieras.

—¿Por qué iba a hacerlo? —dijo Grandcourt, con su voz profunda, mirándola, y luego tomando una naranja, pues estaban en la mesa.

Se hizo a la idea de seguir viajando en yate más allá de lo que se imaginaba; pero al día siguiente, tras un chubasco que la había hecho sentirse enferma al principio, él se acercó a ella y le dijo:

—El demonio ha estado trabajando por la noche. El capitán dice que deberemos quedarnos en Génova por una semana mientras se arreglen las cosas.

—¿Te importa mucho? —dijo Gwendolen, que tenía un aspecto muy pálido entre sus vestidos blancos.

—Creo que sí. ¿A quién le apetece asarse en Génova?

—Será un cambio —dijo Gwendolen, que la languidez la había vuelto menos cauta.

—Yo no quiero que cambie nada. Además, el lugar es intolerable; y uno no puede ni moverse por las calles. Saldré en bote, como solí a hacer, y me las arreglaré. Podré sacar unas horas cada día de esta manera en lugar de pelearnos en un maldito hotel.

Se presentaba una perspectiva esperanzadora. Gwendolen pensaba en las horas en las que estaría sola, ya que Grandcourt no la llevaría al bote con ella, y en su alegría por este alivio inesperado, albergaba fantasías salvajes y contradictorias de qué haría con su libertad —la «huida» que tantas veces había visto ya como una calamidad peor que soportar cualquier cosa, encontraba ahora nuevos argumentos, como un escape de su peor naturaleza —. En sus visiones se imaginaba a un prisionero al que el viento de la noche derrumbaba el muro de su prisión y le libraba de la tortura; era una buena alternativa, era legítimo desearla.

Las nuevas expectativas avivaron sus energías, y empezó a tomarse todas las cosas con un aire de regocijo y presteza tal que fue notado hasta por su marido. Miraba los reflejos de la luna hundiéndose en el mar con una sensación menor de soledad, es más, con una vaga impresión de que este estado actual tan imponente era el preámbulo de su salvación. ¿Por qué no? Hasta el tiempo estaba de su parte. La posibilidad de mantener la esperanza, tras sus largas fluctuaciones entre sus miedos, era como el retorno del hambre a un paciente que había estado mucho tiempo enfermo.

Le despertó a la mañana siguiente el ruido del ancla al amarrar en el puerto de Génova —le despertó de un extraño sueño en el que se vio escapándose por el monte Cenis, sorprendida de mantenerse caliente a esas

alturas bajo la luz de la luna y entre la nieve, hasta que de repente apareció Deronda, que le dijo que volviera—.

Después de una hora más o menos de ese sueño se encontró de hecho con Deronda. Pero fue en las escaleras del palacio del *Italia* donde se sentía caliente en su vestido de seda y con su sombrero de paja; y su marido estaba a su lado.

Deronda manifestó su sorpresa antes de alzar su sombrero y continuar su camino. El momento no parecía favorecer saludos más cordiales, y las circunstancias bajo las que se habían despedido la última vez le hicieron dudar de si Grandcourt le trataría con cortesía.

La duda podía haberse tornado una certidumbre desagradable, pues Grandcourt, ante esta aparición inexplicable de Deronda en Génova, inmediatamente comenzó a pensar cómo podían haber acordado verse allí él y Gwendolen. Es cierto que antes de que se acomodaran en sus habitaciones, veía lo difícil que habría sido concertar una cita, pues no era nada creíble que Gwendolen no solo se hubiera apresurado desde Londres a informar a Deronda de su viaje en yate, sino que además le hubiera mandado una carta desde Marsella o desde Barcelona, pidiéndole que viajara a Génova a tiempo por si por casualidad llegaran a desembarcar allí y encontrarse, o que esperara otra carta de ella comentándole su próximo destino —todo lo cual habría implicado una previsión milagrosa por parte de ella, y una facilidad por parte Deronda para volar de un sitio a otro como si de un pájaro se tratase, posándose en cada ciudad—. Y con todo, allí estaba él, y aunque Grandcourt no iba a quedar como un tonto imaginándose cosas que otros calificarían como absurdas, tampoco estaba dispuesto a admitir totalmente que la presencia de Deronda allí era, por lo que respectaba a Gwendolen, meramente accidental. Era un hecho desagradable; eso bastaba; y sin duda ella estaba encantada. Un hombre enfadado no espera a que haya pruebas para pensar que todas las cosas animadas e inanimadas están en conspiración contra él, sino que inmediatamente trilla a su caballo o patea a su perro. Grandcourt se sentía como si ya supiese que Gwendolen y Deronda hubiesen conspirado contra él, y este hecho lo mostraba. De lo que sí estaba seguro —y en esto adivinó la verdad—, era que Gwendolen estaba planeando una entrevista con Deronda cuando su marido se diera la vuelta.

Mientras estaba sentado tomando café en un ángulo conveniente para observarla, discernió algo que estaba seguro era el efecto de un deleite secreto —cierta desenvoltura al moverse y al hablar, un brillo especial en sus ojos,

mirara donde mirara—. Ciertamente los problemas no habían deteriorado su belleza. La señora Grandcourt era más hermosa que Gwendolen Harleth: su gracia y expresión contaban con una variedad más amplia de experiencia interna, dándole nuevas características a sus rasgos, nuevas actitudes en movimiento y en reposo; toda su persona y su aspecto tenían ese algo indefinible que suele hacer a una mujer más interesante tras casarse que antes, menos segura de que todas las cosas concuerdan con su opinión, pero aún así, con menos timidez, un ser humano más pleno.

Esta mañana, los efectos del viaje parecían revelarse de repente en una repentina elasticidad en su semblante. Cuando se levantó de la mesa y puso sus dos manos ricamente enjoyadas a cada lado del cuello, tal como le gustaba, no fue capaz de ocultar esa especie de expectación gozosa que hace el presente más soportable de lo normal, igual que cuando un hombre decide salir encuentra más fácil ser amable con la familia que un cuarto de hora antes. No es del todo imposible que un terrier, al estar también su gozo implicado, perciba estos signos agradables y conozca su significado: conozca por qué su dueño permanece de pie en una actitud peculiar, hable con presteza, e incluso tenga un brillo especial en sus ojos, de forma que al más mínimo movimiento hacia la puerta, el terrier se apresure para llegar a tiempo. Y, como los perros, Grandcourt discernió los signos de la expectación de Gwendolen, interpretándolos con la poca corrección que deja atrás un mundo de sentimientos desconocidos.

—Eh… llama a Gibbs, por favor, y dile que ordene que la comida esté a las tres —dijo Grandcourt, mientras se levantó, tomó un puro, y alargó la mano hacia el sombrero que estaba colgado cerca—. Voy a enviar a Angus a que encuentre un pequeño bote para que vayamos; uno que pueda llevar yo, y tú estarás al timón. Hace un atardecer precioso, es lo menos aburrido que podemos hacer.

Gwendolen se quedó fría. No solo era por la cruel decepción; tenía además la convicción de que su marido había decidido llevarla con él porque no quería dejarla fuera del alcance de su vista; y probablemente compartir esta soledad en un bote era tanto más atractivo para él porque sería muy aburrido para ella. No estaban en la isla de tablones; creía que allí sería más posible comenzar un combate. Pero ya no tenía ese brillo de felicidad. Hubo un cambio en ella como el de un glaciar tras la puesta de sol.

—Preferiría no ir en el bote —dijo—. Llévate a otra persona contigo.

—Muy bien, si tú no vienes, yo no iré —dijo Grandcourt—. Nos quedaremos achicharrándonos de calor aquí, eso es todo.

—No puedo aguantar ir en bote —dijo Gwendolen, enfadada.

—Eso es un cambio repentino —dijo Grandcourt, con una ligera sonrisa de desprecio—. Pero dado que te niegas a ir, nos quedaremos aquí dentro.

Colgó su sombrero de nuevo, encendió el puro, y paseó de arriba abajo por la habitación, deteniéndose de vez en cuando para mirar por la ventana. El temperamento de Gwendolen quiso resistir. Sabía muy bien que Grandcourt ya no iría sin ella; pero si él tenía que tiranizarla, no iba a ser precisamente de la forma que él quisiera. Le obligaría a quedarse en el hotel. Sin decir nada más, pasó a la habitación contigua y se dejó caer en una silla con todo su enfado, viendo que no había salida ni objetivo alguno —solo sintiendo que la ola del mal la había envuelto de nuevo, y la había sacado de su momentáneo momento de respiro.

Entonces, Grandcourt entró con el sombrero puesto, pero lo tiró y se sentó de costado en una silla que había cerca enfrente de ella, diciendo, arrastrando como siempre las palabras:

—¿Te has calmado ya? ¿O encuentras bien estar de mal humor? Me pones las cosas muy desagradables para mí.

—¿Por qué quieres ponerlas desagradables para mí? —dijo Gwendolen, sintiéndose desamparada de nuevo, con las lágrimas a punto de saltar.

—Y ahora, ¿serás buena y me dirás de qué es de lo que tienes que quejarte? —dijo Grandcourt, mirándole a los ojos, y usando su voz más familiar—. ¿Es porque me quedo aquí si tú te quedas?

No podía encontrar respuesta. No podía exteriorizar la verdad que la excusaba de su enfado. Envuelta en ese conflicto de desesperación y humillación, comenzó a sollozar, y las lágrimas bajaron por sus mejillas —un estado de agitación que nunca con anterioridad había mostrado en presencia de su marido—.

—Espero que esto sirva de algo —dijo Grandcourt, después de unos momentos—. Todo lo que puedo decir es que es de lo más desagradable. Qué es lo que las malditas mujeres piensan que pueden conseguir con esto, no lo sé. Tú ves que puedes conseguir algo, por supuesto. Pero yo lo que veo es que estamos aquí encerrados cuando podríamos pasar un rato agradable en el mar.

—Vamos, pues —dijo Gwendolen, impetuosamente—. Tal vez nos ahoguemos. —Comenzó a sollozar de nuevo.

Esta extraordinaria conducta, que tenía evidentemente cierta relación con Deronda, le permitió a Grandcourt concretar más sus conclusiones. Acercó al máximo su silla a ella, y dijo, en voz baja:

—Estate quieta y escucha, ¿vale?

Parece que hubo un efecto mágico en esta cercanía. Gwendolen se estremeció y dejó de sollozar. Mantuvo sus párpados hacia abajo y se apretó las manos con fuerza.

—Vamos a entendernos —dijo Grandcourt, en el mismo tono—. Sé muy bien lo que significa esta tontería. Pero si crees que te voy a dejar que me trates como a un tonto, olvida cuanto antes esa idea. ¿Qué esperas, si no puedes comportarte apropiadamente como mi mujer? Solo te espera la desgracia, si quieres tenerla, pero no se me ocurre otra cosa; y en cuanto a Deronda, está claro que te está dejando atrás.

—¡Todo eso es falso! —dijo Gwendolen, con amargura—. No te imaginas ni lo más mínimo lo que pasa por mi mente. He visto demasiadas desgracias que llegan por ese camino. Y será mejor que me dejes libertad para hablar con quien quiera. Será mejor para ti.

—Me dejarás que juzgue por mí mismo —dijo Grandcourt, levantándose y apartándose un poco hacia la ventana, pero quedándose allí jugando con sus bigotes como si estuviera esperando algo.

Las palabras de Gwendolen tenían un significado tan claro y tremendo para ella que pensó que debieron transmitirlo a Grandcourt, y tan pronto las exteriorizó, temió su efecto. Pero el alma de él estaba blindada contra los presentimientos y los temores; tenía el coraje y la seguridad del que se sabe dominar, y en ese momento se sentía plenamente satisfecho de atar corta a su mujer. Para cuando llevaran un año casados, ella dejaría de mostrarse tan impaciente. Continuó de pie con su aire de indiferencia, de forma que ella sintió esa conciencia asfixiante de tener algo inamovible que le obstruía la vida, como la pesadilla de tener enfrente un objeto que no te deja pasara a pesar de verse el campo abierto tras él.

—¿A qué decisión has llegado? —dijo al fin, mirándola—. ¿Qué órdenes tengo que dar?

—Oh, vamos —dijo Gwendolen. Las paredes habían empezado a ser una prisión, y mientras hubiera un soplo de vida en este hombre, la controlaría completamente. Sus palabras tenían tanto poder como un tornillo de mariposa o el frío contacto de una roca. Resistirse era actuar como un animal estúpido incapaz de prever las consecuencias.

Así que pidieron que se les preparara el bote. Ella incluso bajó con él al muelle para verlo antes de mediodía. Grandcourt había recobrado su ecuanimidad y sentía una mezcla de menosprecio y satisfacción por la atención que los grupos náuticos daban al *milord*, dueño del hermoso yate que estaban reparando, y al ser un inglés se sentía naturalmente en el mar como si estuviera en casa, de forma que podía encargarse de un barco con la misma facilidad que la de un caballo. La especie de regocijo que había detectado en Gwendolen esta mañana, creía ella detectarla ahora en él; y era cierto que ahora solo le preocupaba este paseo en bote, y que había llevado a cabo su propósito como algo que la gente no había esperado de él, con el gratificante impulso de poder ejercer a sus anchas su voluntad. Tenía un coraje físico muy notable, y estaba orgulloso de él —o más bien despreciaba profundamente a los hombres ordinarios y gruesos que tenían mucho menos. Además, había impuesto que Gwendolen fuera con él—.

Y cuando bajaron de nuevo a las cinco, equipados para embarcar, la escena era tan real como una representación teatral. Esta hermosa pareja inglesa de piel blanca, manifestando la excentricidad habitual de su nación, ambos orgullosos, descoloridos, y tranquilos, sin una sonrisa en sus rostros, moviéndose como criaturas que cumplieran con un destino sobrenatural, era algo digno de ver, incluso de pintar. El pecho, la espalda y los brazos del marido se marcaban perfectamente en su vestido ajustado, y de la mujer se podría haber dicho que era una estatua.

Se oyeron algunas sugerencias respecto a un posible cambio de la brisa, con el necesario cuidado que había que tener, pero la cara de Grandcourt dio a entender a los consejeros que se estaban entrometiendo demasiado, y que él conocía el mar mejor que ellos.

Gwendolen, con su aire impasible, mientras se alejaban de la costa, sentía su imaginación trabajar obstinadamente. No temía ningún peligro externo —estaba asustada de sus propios deseos que tomaban formas posibles e imposibles, como una sucesión de rostros demoníacos. Estaba asustada de su propio odio, que justo hoy reunía una feroz intensidad. Mientras se sentó guiando el timón bajo los ojos de su marido, haciendo lo que le había mandado, su disputa interior era como un esfuerzo de escapar de ella misma. Se aferró al pensamiento de Deronda: se persuadió de que él no se marcharía mientras ella estuviera allí —él sabía que ella necesitaba ayuda—. La sensación de que él estaba allí la salvaría de liberar el mal que había en su interior. Pero aún así, le asaltaban rápidas imágenes llenas de maldad que

volverían y la atraparían por la noche, como arrebatos de furia que prepararan inmediatamente su venganza.

Salieron del puerto y navegaron hacia el este empujados por una suave brisa. Algunas nubes tapaban la luz del sol, y era la hora en que está por llegar la suprema belleza de la noche. Otras embarcaciones más grandes y más pequeñas iban cambiando de aspecto, y resultaban una compañía agradable, algunas más cerca y otras más lejos. La gran ciudad brillaba menos, las montañas destacaban sobre ella, y había una quietud propia de un santuario. Pero de repente Gwendolen dejó caer sus manos, y dijo en un tono apenas audible:

—¡Dios mío, ayúdame!

—¿Qué ocurre? —dijo Grandcourt, sin distinguir sus palabras.

—Oh, nada —dijo Gwendolen, despertando de su olvido momentáneo y retomando las cuerdas.

—¿No encuentras esto agradable?

—Mucho.

—¿Admites ahora que no podíamos haber hecho nada mejor?

—No, no veo nada mejor. Creo que deberíamos salir siempre, como el Holandés errante[276], dijo Gwendolen con atrevimiento.

Grandcourt la examinó atentamente, y luego dijo:

—Si quieres podemos ir a La Spezia y que nos recojan allí.

—No, nada me gusta tanto como esto.

—Muy bien, haremos lo mismo mañana. Pero debemos volver pronto. Voy a virar el bote.

Capítulo 55

> Ritorna a tua scienza
> che vuol, quanto la cosa é piú perfetta
> piú senta il bene, e cosí la doglienza.
>
> DANTE[277]

CUANDO DERONDA SE TOPÓ CON GWENDOLEN Y CON GRANDCOURT EN LAS escaleras, estaba seriamente preocupado. Acaba de ser citado para su segunda entrevista con su madre. Dos horas después de despedirse de ella ya sabía que la Princesa Halm-Eberstein había abandonado el hotel, y por lo que se refería al propósito de su viaje a Génova, podría haber partido ya para Mainz, para entregar la carta de Joseph Kalonymos, y quedarse con el cofre familiar. Pero ciertas preocupaciones difusas, que no acababan de definirse en motivos claros, le impidieron marchar. Tras la despedida, estuvo un buen tiempo embotado bajo el peso de un sentimiento retrospectivo. Vivía otra vez con un nuevo entusiasmo por sus recuerdos emotivos, escenas que parecían haber pasado como preparación para el estado actual de su alma. Se permitió en su soledad sollozar, y tal vez movía más a compasión que los sollozos de una mujer, por la vida de esa mujer tan cercana a la suya, y a la vez tan remota. Notaba el mundo cambiado por la certeza de los lazos que alteraban el equilibrio de las esperanzas y los miedos, y sintió una nueva sensación de compañerismo, como si bajo el manto de la noche se hubiera unido al grupo equivocado de caminantes, y hubiera hallado por la mañana que las tiendas de sus familiares habían acampado lejos. Tenía una escalofriante sensación de cercanía con el abuelo, animado por fuertes impulsos y pensamientos entrañables, que tal vez habían sido despertados tras un largo letargo. Y entre todas estas meditaciones pasionales Mardoqueo y Mirah estaban siempre presentes, como seres que le acompañaban en un silencio comprensivo.

Esta era la fibra, resuelta y sensible, de la que estaba hecho Deronda, oculta tras esa reserva de autocontrol con la que la experiencia le había obligado a cubrirse.

El sonido persistente de un timbre le recordó que había pensado en mirar la guía *Bradshaw*[278], y hacer los preparativos necesarios para coger el próximo tren —solo se lo recordó, pero no hizo caso—. Algunos

pensamientos le llevaban a Mainz y en lo que le iban a dar allí; otros, a Londres, y a los seres que estaban allí, con los que se sentía más apegado que con nadie; pero tenía otros pensamientos puestos en Génova, y le retenían donde estaba por esa fuerza que nos impulsa a seguir dándole vueltas a una entrevista que lleva el sello de la despedida final o la sombra de la tristeza. Deronda no dijo formalmente: «Me quedaré está noche, porque es viernes, y me gustaría ir al oficio nocturno de la sinagoga, donde no quedará ya nadie, y además puede que vea a los Grandcourt otra vez», sino que, simplemente, en lugar de recoger sus cosas y pedir que le trajeran la cuenta, se sentó sin hacer nada, mientras su mente se dirigía a la sinagoga y vio allí rostros probablemente un poco distintos de los que había en la época de su abuelo, y oyó la liturgia hebrea-española que había perdurado a través de los tiempos y generaciones como una planta que arroja sus semillas, que otorga a las tierras lejanas una familiaridad en la casa del exilio —mientras que, a la vez, su mente se posaba en Gwendolen, con un recuerdo angustioso de lo que había pasado, y con la impresión admitida a medias de que sería muy cruel por su parte marcharse por su propia voluntad y enseguida, sin hacer el esfuerzo, a pesar de que probablemente no le hiciera nada de gracia a Grandcourt, de manifestar que seguía apoyándola desde su abrupta despedida—.

En ese estado interior retrasó su partida, cenó sin sentir el gusto de la comida, se levantó rápidamente para buscar la sinagoga, y al pasar por delante del portero le preguntó si el señor y la señora Grandcourt estaban todavía en el hotel, y cuál era el número de su habitación. El portero le dio el número, pero añadió que habían salido en barca. De alguna manera, esa información le hizo a Deronda reenfocar sus pensamientos hacia los recuerdos despertados por los escasos *talit*[279] y los rostros oscuros y profundos de los adoradores, cuya forma de proferir las oraciones y las invocaciones habían decaído hasta un hebreo casi italianizado, y le hizo caer en la cuenta de que su abuelo, por el carácter que había insinuado la Princesa, tenía que haber sido un judío tan excepcional como Mardoqueo. ¿Pero no eran en cualquier parte excepcionales los hombres de celo ardiente y grandes esperanzas? Hombres que tenían visiones que, como dijo Mardoqueo, eran los creadores y los que alimentaban el mundo, moldeando otras vidas más pasivas, que sin ellos acabarían reducidas a la estrecha tenacidad de los insectos, sin conmoverse por ideas más allá de sus antenas. Tal vez se añadía algo de impaciencia afligida a la solicitud de Gwednolen (una solicitud que tenía espacio para crecer al verse liberado de obligaciones inmediatas) como incentivo para salir

rápidamente de la sinagoga y decidir dar su paseo nocturno hacia el muelle, algo que siempre le gustaba, y que ahora le atraía más por la posibilidad de llegar a tiempo y ver a los Grandcourt volver de su paseo en barca. En ese caso, decidió que se dirigiría a ellos y les saludaría deliberadamente, ignorando los motivos que pudiera tener el marido para desear que estuviera en otra parte.

El sol se había puesto tras un banco de nubes, y tan solo una débil luminosidad daba sus besos de despedida a las olas, agitadas por una brisa creciente. Deronda, paseando tranquilamente pendiente de lo que ocurría en el puerto, observó a los grupos que había allí concentrando su atención en un bote que avanzaba rápidamente hacia tierra, en el que dos hombres remaban. Al hablar todo el mundo atropelladamente y en varias lenguas, Deronda pensó que la mejor forma de conseguir información era no hacer preguntas, sino acercarse a primera línea y convertirse en testigo de primera mano de lo que estaba ocurriendo. La gente usaba telescopios, y por lo que se oía, la barca llevaba a alguien que se había ahogado. Alguien dijo que era el *milord* que había salido a dar un paseo en bote; otro aseguraba que la figura que él veía postrada era *miladi*; un francés sin prismáticos dijo que era *milord* que había sacado probablemente a su mujer para ahogarla, según la práctica nacional —una observación que un patrón de barco inglés comentó en nuestra forma de hablar nativa, diciendo que eso era una tontería, pero luego aceptó que la figura que se veía tumbada era la de una mujer—. Para Deronda, terriblemente exaltado por miedos alternantes, las paladas de los remos mientras los observaba le hicieron pensar rápidamente en varios desenlaces, posibles e imposibles, de este suceso, o más bien fragmentos de un suceso, que podían significar lo peor —si esta mujer aparentemente rescatada de las aguas fuera realmente la señora Grandcourt—.

Pero pronto se despejaron las dudas: el bote estaba siendo arrastrado a tierra, y vio a Gwendolen medio levantándose con sus manos, por su propio esfuerzo, bajo su gruesa manta de lona y su chaqueta verde, pálida como un cadáver amortajado, tiritando, con el pelo chorreando, sus ojos mostraban una conciencia salvaje y sorprendida, como si hubiera despertado en un mundo en el que se estaba a punto de juzgar a alguien, y los seres que veía a su alrededor se acercaban a por ella. El primer remador que saltó a tierra estaba también empapado, y se escapó corriendo; los marineros, cerca del bote, no dejaban que Deronda se acercara, y solo pudo mirar de lejos mientras Gwendolen lanzaba miradas fugaces, y pareció encogerse de terror mientras

le ayudaban a salir cuidadosa y suavemente, sostenida por los fuertes brazos de esos hombres rudos y bronceados, con sus ropas empapadas adheridas a sus miembros, algo que aún la hacía más débil. De repente, sus ojos extraviados se toparon con los de Deronda, que estaba en frente de ella, e inmediatamente, como si le hubiera estado esperando, intentó estirar sus brazos, sostenidos por sus ayudantes, diciendo, con voz ahogada:

—¡Ha ocurrido! ¡Ha ocurrido! ¡Está muerto!

—¡Calle, calle! —dijo Deronda, con autoridad—; cálmese. —Y a los hombres que la estaban ayudando—: Soy pariente del marido de esta señora. Si la dejan en el *Italia* tan pronto como sea posible, yo me haré cargo de lo demás.

Se quedó para oír del último marinero que su marido se había ahogado sin posibilidad de reanimarlo, y que dejaron su bote flotar vacío. Él y su compañero habían oído un grito, habían llegado a tiempo de ver a la señora saltar tras su marido, y la sacaron rápidamente para evitar otra desgracia.

Tras esto, Deronda se apresuró al hotel para asegurarse que le procurasen la mejor ayuda médica; y cuando quedó satisfecho respecto a este punto, contó por telégrafo el suceso a Sir Hugo, rogándole que viniera inmediatamente, y telegrafió también al señor Gascoigne, pues dirigirse a la rectoría era la forma más rápida de hacer saber la noticia a la madre de Gwendolen. Le vinieron a la mente ciertas palabras de Gwendolen del pasado como una inspiración: le había confesado en algún momento de agitación que la presencia de su madre era para ella de gran ayuda.

Capítulo 56

> El espasmo, la maldición con la que murieron,
> nunca había de pasar;
> no podía apartar mis ojos de los suyos
> ni alzarlos para rezar.
>
> Coleridge[280]

Deronda no se desvistió esa noche. Gwendolen, tras insistir en volver a verle antes de que consintiera en mudarse de ropa, había estado muy tranquila, y solo le había pedido, con impaciencia reprimida, susurrante, prometerle que vendría a verla por la mañana cuando le llamase. Con todo, la posibilidad de que pudiera producirse un cambio en ella, el peligro de que le subiera la fiebre, y la sospecha de que algo de la reciente catástrofe estaba produciendo un efecto que podría traicionarse con palabras alteradas, actuaron de prevención. Mencionó a la asistenta de ella que le avisaran inmediatamente si se producía cualquier cambio alarmante en los síntomas, dando a entender a todos los implicados que estaba en comunicación con sus amigos de Inglaterra, y que se sentía mientras obligado a cuidar de ella en su nombre —una posición que era tanto más fácil para él asumirla en cuanto que era bien conocido por el ayuda de cámara de Grandcourt, el único de sus sirvientes que les había acompañado en el viaje—.

Pero cuando la fatiga producida por las extrañas y variadas emociones del día arrastró a Deronda por fin a dormir, descansó tranquilo hasta que le asaltaron los sueños matutinos, que se presentaron como una maraña de los sucesos del día anterior, y le acabaron despertando, lleno de ansiedad por las imágenes revividas.

Con todo, era la mañana, y no había habido noticias —un augurio que le alegró mientras se arreglaba—, y pensó que era demasiado pronto para mandar que le dijeran algo. Más tarde, supo que ella había pasado toda la noche despierta, pero sin mostrar signos violentos de agitación, y que al final se quedó dormida. Se maravillaba de la fuerza que residía en esta criatura, tan viva que asustaba; pues tenía la irresistible impresión de que incluso estando bajo los efectos de un severo impacto físico se estaba controlando con la determinación de encubrir su agitación. En cuanto a él, pensaba que su

sensibilidad estaba confusa por lo que había sucedido en el encuentro con su madre: tenía la sensación de haber satisfecho sus demandas, pero su compasión se hallaba en suspenso. Había estado viviendo en los últimos días una experiencia tan profunda y tan alejada de los problemas de Gwendolen, que su preocupación presente por ella era como un reencuentro con las escenas familiares del pasado, sin que hubiera aún una respuesta completa a ellas.

Mientras tanto, se ocupó en conseguir una declaración formal, con reconocimiento legal, del pescador que había rescatado a Gwendolen. Salieron a la luz pocos detalles. El bote con el que había salido al mar Grandcourt fue hallado a la deriva con la vela suelta, y fue remolcado. Los pescadores pensaron que seguramente había recibido un golpe de la vela mientras intentaba virar el barco, y había caído al mar sin saber nadar; a pesar de estar cerca, lo primero que les llamó la atención fue el grito de un hombre que parecía pedir ayuda, y mientras se apresuraban con sus remos, oyeron el chillido de la señora, y la vieron saltar.

Al volver al hotel, le dijeron a Deronda que Gwendolen se había levantado y que quería verle. Fue conducido hasta una habitación oscurecida por las persianas y las cortinas, en la que ella estaba sentada envuelta en un chal blanco, mirando hacia la puerta entreabierta como alguien que espera ansiosa. Pero sus largos cabellos estaban recogidos y enrollados cuidadosamente, y destacando por encima de todo, sus pendientes azules permanecían en sus orejas: cuando se levantó impulsivamente, mostrando toda su figura —el rostro y el cuello no menos blancos que su chal salvo una línea púrpura bajo sus ojos, los labios algo apartados con la expresión peculiar de alguien que ha sido acusada y se encuentra sin ayuda—, parecía el infeliz espíritu de esa Gwendolen Harleth a la que Deronda había visto sobreponerse con labios firmes y orgulloso autocontrol de sus pérdidas en la mesa del juego. La visión le traspasó el alma, y empezó a revivir los efectos de todas sus relaciones pasadas.

—Le ruego que descanse, que no se levante —dijo Deronda, mientras se acercaba a ella, que obedeció dejándose caer de nuevo en su silla.

—¿Se sentará a mi lado? —dijo—. Quiero hablar en voz baja.

Ella estaba en un gran sillón, y él arrastró uno pequeño a su lado. Esa acción pareció conmoverla de forma peculiar: volviendo completamente hacia él su pálido rostro, que estaba muy cerca, dijo, en un tono lo más bajo posible:

—¿Sabe que soy una mujer culpable?

El mismo Deronda palideció aún más al decir:

—No sé nada. —No se atrevía a decir nada más.

—Está muerto —pronunció estas palabras con el mismo tono casi imperceptible.

—Sí —dijo Deronda, con tristeza y ansiedad, sin querer seguir hablando.

—Nadie verá ya su rostro fuera del agua —dijo Gwendolen, en un tono que, sin ser más alto, mostraba una ilusión reprimida, a la vez que se apretaba las manos.

—No.

—Nadie excepto yo… un rostro muerto… no podré quitármelo de la cabeza.

Dijo estas palabras con la voz interior de una represión desesperada, mientras apartaba la vista de Deronda hacia algo a cierta distancia en el suelo. ¿Estaba reviviendo todo el suceso —incluidos sus propios actos— exagerando su emoción y el horror? ¿Se hallaba en un estado de delirio en el que intentaba ocultar y reprimir sus sensaciones? Tales pensamientos cruzaron la mente de Deronda como una especie de esperanza. Pero imaginad el conflicto de sus sentimientos que le mantenían silencioso. Ella estaba a punto de confesar, y él temía oír la confesión. En contra de sus mejores intenciones, se revelaba contra la tarea que se le imponía: quería, y aún así rechazaba ese deseo como cosa cobarde, que ella enterrara sus secretos en su propio pecho. Él no era un sacerdote. Temía el peso del alma de esta mujer con la que tendría que cargar y soportar su dependencia implorante. Pero ella habló de nuevo, apresuradamente, mirándole a los ojos:

—¿No me dirá que tengo que contárselo al mundo? ¿No me dirá que tengo que ser desgraciada? No podría hacerlo. No lo soportaría. Mi madre no puede saberlo. Ni aún después de la muerte. Nunca se lo diría. Se lo tengo que contra a usted; pero no me diga que lo tiene que saber alguien más.

—No puedo decir nada porque no sé nada —dijo Deronda, con gran tristeza—, salvo que deseo ayudarla.

—Le dije desde el principio (tan pronto como pude), le dije que tenía miedo de mí misma. —Era una súplica lastimera el bajo susurro que oyó Deronda. Su cara le afligía en extremo—. Sentía un odio en mí que actuaba siempre como un espíritu maligno, urdiendo cosas. Me venía a la mente todo lo que podía hacer para liberarme; y la cosa empeoró, todo empeoró. Por eso le pedí que viniera a verme a casa. Pensé entonces que podía contarle lo peor de mí misma. Lo intenté. Pero no se lo pude contar todo. Y él entró.

Hizo una pausa, y se estremeció; pero enseguida continuó:

—Se lo contaré todo ahora. ¿Cree usted que una mujer que lloraba, rezaba y luchaba para verse libre podría ser una asesina?

—¡Santo Dios! —dijo Deronda, con voz profunda y conmovida—, no me torture innecesariamente. Usted no le asesinó. Se lanzó al agua impulsada para salvarle. Cuénteme qué pasó luego. Esta muerte fue un accidente que no pudo evitar.

—No sea impaciente conmigo. —El temblor, la súplica infantil de estas palabras obligaron a Deronda a volver su rostro y mirarle a la cara. Sus pobres labios temblorosos prosiguieron—: Usted dijo (solía decir) que tenía más compasión por los que habían hecho algo malvado y eran desgraciados; dijo que podían conseguir algo mejor, que podían ser redimidos. Si no hubiera hablado de esa manera, todo habría sido peor. Me acuerdo de todo lo que me dijo. Siempre lo recordaba. Lo recordé en el último instante, esa es la razón por la que yo… Pero si usted no soporta seguir conmigo cuando se lo cuente todo, si se va y me abandona, ¿qué haré? ¿Soy ahora peor que cuando me encontró y quiso hacerme mejor? Todo lo malo que hecho ya estaba en mí entonces, y más… y más… si no hubiera venido y hubiera sido paciente conmigo. Así que, ¿me abandonará?

Sus manos, que tan apretadas tenía hacía unos minutos, se hallaban relajadas e impotentes, temblando sobre los brazos del sillón. Sus labios temblorosos quedaron abiertos mientras dejó de hablar. Deronda no podía responder; tuvo que apartar su mirada. Le cogió una de las manos, apretándosela como si fueran a dar un paseo como dos niños: era la única forma en que podía responderle: «No le abandonaré». Y sintió como si hubiera escrito su nombre en una hoja en blanco en la que se pudiera escribir cualquier cosa terrible. La actitud de ambos, el rostro de él con su expresión de sufrimiento que estaba decidido a sobrellevar, habría sido casi suficiente para entender lo que pasaba para un observador que acabara de entrar.

Esa forma de ser cogida era una experiencia totalmente nueva para Gwendolen: nunca había experimentado de ningún hombre un signo de ternura que su propio ser necesitase, e interpretó el poderoso efecto que tuvo en ella como una promesa de paciencia y constancia inagotable. Esa fuente de renovada fuerza le permitió continuar como había empezado: con esa confesión intermitente e irregular en la que la monotonía de la experiencia parece anular el sentido del tiempo o del orden de los sucesos. Comenzó de nuevo de forma interrumpida:

—Tenía tantas estratagemas, pero todas tan difíciles. Y luché contra ellas, me aterrorizaban, veía su rostro muerto —al decir esto su voz se apagó casi hasta un susurro al oído de Deronda—. Hacía tanto tiempo que lo veía y deseaba que estuviera muerto. Pero aún así me aterrorizaba. Yo era como dos criaturas. No podía hablar… quería matar… era tan fuerte como la sed… y entonces, directamente… supe de antemano que había hecho algo terrible, inalterable… algo que me haría ser un espíritu maligno. Y sucedió… sucedió.

Permaneció en silencio unos momentos, como si su memoria se hubiera perdido en una tela de araña, en la que cada hilo guiaba al resto.

—Todo estaba ya en mi mente la primera vez que hablé con usted, cuando estábamos en la Abadía. Había hecho algo entonces. No podía decírselo. Fue lo más parecido que hice para llevar a cabo mis pensamientos. Muchos de ellos eran muy audaces, pero todos permanecían como sueños espantosos… todos menos uno. Hice una cosa… y nunca la deshice… todavía está ahí… como hace tiempo cuando estábamos en Ryelands. Ahí estaba… algo que mis dedos preferían entre los hermosos juguetes de la vitrina de mi tocador… pequeño y afilado como una hoja alargada de sauce dentro de una funda de plata. Lo encerré en el cajón de mi joyero. Continuamente pensaba en él y en cómo usarlo. Me imaginé poniéndomelo bajo la almohada. Pero nunca lo hice. Nunca volví a mirarlo. No me atreví a abrir el cajón: tenía su propia llave; y no hace mucho, cuando estábamos en el yate, lancé la llave al fondo del mar. Mi intención era arrojarla al mar y entregarme. Luego empecé a pensar cómo podría abrir el cajón sin la llave: y cuando supe que íbamos a alojarnos en Génova, pensé que podría abrirlo en privado en el hotel. Pero entonces, cuando subíamos las escaleras, me encontré con usted; y pensé que debía hablarle a solas y contarle esto, todo lo que no pude contarle en la ciudad; y entonces fui obligada a salir en la barca.

Por primera vez se le escapó un sollozo con estas últimas palabras, y se echó para atrás en su sillón. El recuerdo de esa aguda decepción pareció borrar por un momento lo que había ocurrido desde entonces. Deronda no la miró, pero dijo, con insistencia:

—Y todo ha quedado en su imaginación. Solo ha tenido continuidad en sus pensamientos. ¿La tentación maligna ha sido resistida hasta el final?

Hubo silencio. Las lágrimas le bajaban por las mejillas. Se las frotó con su pañuelo y se sentó bien erguida. Estaba valorando qué iba a hacer; y de nuevo, inclinándose ligeramente hacia el oído de Deronda, empezó en un susurro:

—No, no; se lo contaré todo como lo sabe Dios. No le diré nada que sea mentira; le contaré la verdad exacta. ¿Qué otra cosa podría hacer? Solía pensar que nunca sería malvada. Pensaba en la gente malvada como si estuvieran muy lejos de mí. Desde entonces, he sido malvada. Me he sentido malvada. Y todo ha sido un castigo para mí. Porque… ya sabe… no me debería haber casado. Ese fue el comienzo. Hice daño a otra persona. Rompí mi promesa. Quise el placer para mí, y todo se volvió en desgracia. Quería ganar a costa de la pérdida de otra, ¿lo recuerda? Era como en la ruleta… y el dinero me quemaba en las manos. Y no pude quejarme. Era como si hubiera rezado por que otro perdiera y yo ganara. Y yo había ganado, lo sabía todo, sabía que era culpable. Cuando estábamos en el mar, y estaba despierta por la noche en la cabina, a veces sentía que todo lo que había hecho estaba al descubierto… que no había nada oculto… ¿cómo podía saber algo solo yo? No era mi propio conocimiento, era el conocimiento de Dios que había entrado en mí, e incluso la quietud, todo era un castigo para mí, todo excepto usted. Siempre pensé que usted no querría verme castigada, que habría intentado ayudarme para ser mejor. Y solo pensar de esa forma me ayudaba. ¿No cambiará ahora de parecer, no querrá verme castigada?

De nuevo, hubo un sollozo.

—¡Dios no lo quiera! —gruñó Deronda. Pero no se movió de su asiento.

Este largo paseo por sus recuerdos del pasado, marcado por los remordimientos, era difícil de soportar, pero no se atrevió a presionarla con una pregunta. Tenía que dejar que fuera a su propio ritmo. De manera inconsciente, ella dejaba intervalos en su retrospectiva, sin distinguir claramente entre lo que decía y aquello de lo que solo tenía una visión interior. Sus siguientes palabras vinieron tras uno de estos intervalos.

—Fue tan duro que me hiciera volver a ir en barca. Porque cuando le vi a usted sentí una alegría inesperada, y pensé que se lo podría contar todo sobre el cajón cerrado con llave y lo que no le había dicho antes. Y si se lo hubiera contado, y hubiera sabido que estaba en su mente, habría tenido menos poder sobre mí. Esperaba y confiaba en ello. Pues detrás de todas mis luchas y mis lloros, mi odio y mi rabia, y la tentación que me asustaba, siempre volvía el anhelo, las ansias por lo que tanto temía. Y esa decepción, que se me impidiera hablar con usted, y que se me obligara a volver al bote, trajo consigo de nuevo todo el mal, como si hubiera estado encerrada con él en una prisión y no tuviera escapatoria. ¡Oh, parece que haya pasado tanto tiempo

desde que embarqué en ese bote! Habría dado cualquier cosa por tener un arma en ese momento y atravesársela hasta matarlo.

Algo de la ferocidad comprimida de entonces se mostraba en su voz baja. Tras un pequeño silencio, dijo con agitación:

—Si él estuviera de nuevo aquí, ¿qué haría yo? No puedo desear que esté aquí, y aún así no puedo soportar su rostro muerto. Fui una cobarde. Tenía que haber mostrado mi desprecio. Tenía que haberme marchado, haberme ido y vagar como una pordiosera antes que quedarme y sentirme como una desalmada. Pero aunque me hubiera ido, siempre habría habido algo que no hubiera podido soportar. A veces pensaba que me mataría si me oponía a su voluntad. Pero ahora, su rostro muerto está ahí, y yo no puedo soportarlo.

De repente, soltando la mano de Deronda, se puso en pie, estiró sus brazos hacia arriba, y dijo con una especie de gemido:

—¡He sido una mujer cruel! ¿Qué puedo hacer sino gritar pidiendo ayuda? Me estoy hundiendo. Muere… muere… estás abandonada… húndete, húndete en la oscuridad. Abandonada… sin piedad… Estaré abandonada.

Se hundió de nuevo en su sillón y prorrumpió en sollozos. Ni siquiera Deronda ocupaba un lugar en su consciencia en ese momento. Él estaba completamente amedrentado. En lugar de hallar, como había imaginado, que su propia última experiencia hubiera atenuado su susceptibilidad, parecía que el destino de esta joven criatura, cuya rápida transición de su brillante e impetuosa infancia a esta agonía de remordimientos contemplaba sin poder ayudarla, le afligiese aún más profundamente al llegar casi al mismo tiempo que otra triste revelación de conflicto espiritual: estaba en uno de esos momentos en los que la misma angustia de la compasión nos predispone para elegir no disfrutar más de la vida, y vivir solo para los angustiados y afligidos. Se había levantado de su asiento mientras observaba ese terrible arrebato —que le parecía tanto más horroroso porque, incluso en esta conmoción suprema, ella mostraba la voz contenida del que hace una confesión en secreto—. Al final, se sintió impulsado a darle la espalda y alejarse un poco. Pero por ahora había tranquilidad. Tenía la sensación de haberse alejado de ella. Cuando Deronda se dio media vuelta para acercarse de nuevo a ella, vio su cara ladeada hacia él, sus ojos dilatados, sus labios abiertos. Era la viva imagen de la tímida súplica abandonada, demasiado tímida para interrumpirle con palabras mientras se hallase apartado de ella. ¿La estaba él abandonando, ahora, ya? Pero sus ojos la miraron afligidos, la miraron por primera vez desde que había dicho: «Ya sabe que soy una mujer culpable», y esa mirada,

en su intensa tristeza parecía decir: «Lo sé, pero precisamente por eso no la abandonaré». Se sentó a su lado en la misma actitud, sin volver hacia ella el rostro y sin cogerle de nuevo la mano.

Una vez más, Gwendolen fue traspasada, como lo había sido por su cara afligida en la Abadía, por unos remordimientos menos egoístas que los que la habían llevado a confesarlo todo, y dijo, en un tono de lamento cariñoso:

—Le hago a usted muy infeliz.

Deronda hizo un «Oh» indiferente, a la vez que se encogía y cambiaba un poco su postura. Luego, reunió la suficiente determinación para decir claramente:

—No se trata ahora de mi felicidad o infelicidad. Lo que más deseo en este momento es lo que más la ayudará a usted. Cuénteme todo lo que necesite contarme.

A pesar de que estas palabras eran cariñosas, abrieron una distancia espiritual entre ellos, y ella se dio cuenta de que era más difícil seguir hablando: tenía una vaga necesidad de acercarse a esa compasión que parecía considerarla desde un halo de superioridad, y la necesidad se tornó en un impulso de humillarse aún más. Estaba dispuesta a arrodillarse ante él; pero no, su conciencia, impresionantemente variada, frenó ese impulso, y se mantuvo en silencio y sin moverse presionada por necesidades contradictorias. Deronda, al verla tan quieta, dijo al fin:

—Tal vez esté demasiado cansada. ¿Prefiere que me marche y vuelva cuando lo desee?

—No, no —dijo Gwendolen; el miedo de verle marchar le devolvió la capacidad de hablar. Continuó con su bajo tono de ansiedad—: Quiero contarle qué es lo que me sucedió en el bote. Estaba rabiosa por haber sido obligada a embarcar… llena de rabia… y no podía hacer nada más que sentarme como un esclavo en las galeras. Y entonces salimos… fuera del puerto… hacia el horizonte… y todo estaba tranquilo… y no nos mirábamos para nada, solo él me hablaba para ordenarme cosas… y la misma cordura que conservaba me retenía prisionera y me obligaba a permanecer sentada como hice. Empecé a pensar que cuando era una niña solía imaginarme salir a navegar a un mundo en el que no se obligaba a la gente a vivir con quien no quisiera (a mí no me gustaba que mi padrastro viniera a casa). Y ahora, pensaba, me había ocurrido justo lo contrario. Había entrado en una barca, y mi vida era un navegar en dirección contraria… sin ayuda… siempre en soledad con él, lejos de la salvación. Y como me sentía más desamparada que

nunca, mis pensamientos volaron hacia las peores cosas… deseé esas cosas… tenía deseos crueles… me imaginé modos imposibles de… yo no quería morir; tenía miedo de que nos ahogáramos juntos. Si hubiera servido de algo habría rezado… habría rezado por que le pasara algo a él. Habría rezado por que se hundiera fuera de mi vista y me dejara sola. No se me ocurría ninguna forma de matarle allí, pero lo hice, le maté en mis pensamientos.

Quedó en silencio un minuto, sumergida bajo el peso del recuerdo que no podía representarse con palabras.

—Y mientras, sentía que me volvía más malvada. Y lo que había estado dentro de mí tanto tiempo, vino justo entonces… lo que dijo usted una vez… que temía que yo hiciera más mal y sentir más remordimientos… no tenía esperanza en nada entonces. Era como si lo tuviera escrito en fuego. Ser malvada era una desgracia… ser separada para siempre de su… de las vidas mejores. Eso me volvía a la cabeza, pero con desesperación, con la sensación de que ya no había remedio… los deseos malignos eran tan fuertes. Recuerdo entonces haber dejado el timón y decir: «¡Que Dios me ayude!». Pero fui obligada a cogerlo de nuevo y a continuar; y volvieron los deseos malignos, las oraciones malignas, y lo dejaron todo nublado, hasta que en medio de ellos… no sé cómo fue… él estaba dando la vuelta a la vela… hubo una ráfaga de aire… se golpeó… no me acuerdo de nada… solo que vi mi deseo fuera de mí.

Comenzó a hablar más deprisa, y más en susurros.

—Le vi hundirse, y mi corazón dio un vuelco como si se me hubiera salido. Creo que no me moví. Mantuve mis manos atadas. Duró demasiado para empezar a alegrarme, pero aún así creía que no valía la pena, que saldría de nuevo a la superficie. Y salió… más lejos… el barco se había desplazado. Fue como un relámpago. «¡La cuerda!», gritó con una voz distinta de la suya (aún la oigo), y me agaché para cogerla, sentía que tenía que hacerlo, sabía que él podría nadar, y que volvería, y le temía tanto. Todo eso estaba en mi mente… que él volvería. Pero se hundió otra vez… y yo tenía la cuerda en la mano… no, apareció de nuevo… su cara sobre el agua… y volvió a gritar… y me sujeté la mano, y mi corazón decía: «¡Muere!» y se hundió; y pensé: «Ya está hecho. Soy una malvada. ¡Estoy perdida!» y tenía la cuerda en mi mano… no sé lo que pensaba… quería alejarme de mí misma… le habría salvado entonces. Quería apartarme de mi crimen, y allí estaba… a mi lado mientras yo caía… su rostro muerto, muerto. Ya no se puede hacer nada. Eso

es lo que pasó. Eso es lo que hice. Ya lo sabe usted todo. No se puede hacer nada.

Se hundió de nuevo en su sillón, exhausta por la agitación de los recuerdos y el relato. Deronda sentía que la carga sobre su espíritu era menos pesada que lo que había temido. La palabra «culpable» incluía una posibilidad de interpretaciones peores que las del hecho; y la confesión de Gwendolen, por la misma razón que su conciencia se detenía en el poder determinante de sus pensamientos malignos, le convenció aún más de que había estado luchando por sacar lo mejor de sí misma. Parecía casi seguro de que sus pensamientos asesinos no habían tenido efectos externos, y que la muerte había sido inevitable. Aun así, la pregunta sobre la efectividad de un fuerte deseo criminal para incitar un acto momentáneo no puede alterar nuestro juicio del deseo; y Deronda se estremeció por hacerse esa pregunta desde el primer momento. Creía probable que el remordimiento de Gwendolen agravaba su culpabilidad interior, y que ella otorgaba el carácter de acción decisiva a lo que había sido un inapreciable instante de deseo. Pero su remordimiento era el signo valioso de una naturaleza que sabía recuperarse; era la culminación de esa desaprobación de sí misma que había sido el despertar de su nueva vida; eso la distanciaba de los criminales cuyo único lamento es el fracaso de no conseguir su deseo maligno. Deronda no pudo decir ni una palabra que redujera esa sagrada aversión hacia los aspectos más negativos de ella, esa punzante presión que inevitablemente acompañaba la triste coronación de lo mejor, sufriendo por lo peor. Todos estos enredados pensamientos le mantuvieron en silencio; la conversación era demasiado trascendental para aventurarse a hablar precipitadamente. No existían palabras de consuelo que no llevaran con ellas cierto sacrilegio. Si hubiera abierto los labios para hablar, solo podría haber repetido: «Ya no se puede hacer nada, es inalterable, de forma que pueden cambiarse otras cosas». Pero se quedó callado y sin moverse (no supo cuánto tiempo) antes de volverse para mirarla, y verla de espaldas con los ojos cerrados, como una conejita blanca perdida, cansada, desorientada por la tormenta, incapaz de levantarse y encontrar su camino. Se levantó y se puso delante de ella. El movimiento le devolvió la conciencia, y abrió los ojos con un ligero estremecimiento que parecía miedo.

—Ahora debe descansar. Intente descansar: intente dormir. ¿Y puedo verla de nuevo por la noche, cuando haya reposado? No nos digamos nada más por ahora.

Afloraron las lágrimas, y ella no pudo responder salvo con un ligero movimiento de cabeza. Deronda llamó al timbre para que la atendieran, dio órdenes urgentes de la necesidad de que descansara, y la dejó.

Capítulo 57

> Uva verde, uva madura, uva pasa, todo es cambio, no para el no ser, sino para lo que ahora no es.
>
> MARCO AURELIO[281]

> Las acciones son el pulso del Tiempo, sus palpitaciones,
> y lo honesto y deshonesto, una vez hecho,
> debe mantenerse en movimiento hasta que el tiempo mismo
> quede detenido, y el universo
> ya no tiemble ni respire.

POR LA NOCHE, ELLA ORDENÓ QUE LE LLAMASEN DE NUEVO. ERA MÁS O MENOS LA hora en la que la habían traído del mar la noche anterior, y quedaba poca luz a pesar de estar las persianas levantadas y las ventanas abiertas. Estaba sentada mirando fijamente el mar, con la mano apoyada en la mejilla; parecía menos trastornada que cuando la había dejado, con una expresión de profunda melancolía que a medida que Deronda se acercaba se transformó en una ansiosa timidez. Ella no le ofreció la mano, pero dijo:

—¡Cuánto tiempo ha pasado! —Luego—: ¿Se sentará un poquito más a mi lado?

Se situó a su lado como había hecho antes, y al ver que se volvía hacia él con esa expresión indefinible que implica el deseo de decir algo, esperó a que hablara. Pero ella volvió a mirar por la ventana sin decir nada, y de nuevo volvió la misma expresión, que todavía no se materializaba en palabras. Había algún temor que le impedía hablar, y Deronda, con el deseo de aliviar su timidez, apartó la vista. Al final oyó su lamento suplicante:

—¿No me dirá que lo tiene que saber alguien más?

—Decididamente, no —dijo Deronda—. No hay ninguna acción que tenga que ser tomada en cuenta. No ha habido ningún daño que deba ser reparado en ese sentido. No hay ninguna retribución que deba repartirse apropiadamente.

Estuvo tan quieta durante la pausa que parecía aguantar la respiración antes de decir:

—Pero si no hubiera tenido ese deseo asesino, si en ese momento hubiera lanzado la cuerda al instante, tal vez podría haber impedido su muerte.

—No, no lo creo —dijo Deronda lentamente—. Si fuera cierto que supiese nadar, habría cogido esa cuerda con calambres. Aunque hubiera actuado con la máxima presteza, parece imposible que hubiera podido hacer algo para salvarle. Ese pensamiento homicida momentáneo no pudo, creo, haber cambiado el curso de los acontecimientos. Su efecto queda exclusivamente confinado en los motivos de su propio corazón. Para nosotros, nuestra mala voluntad es trascendental, y tarde o temprano sale, puede ser en la corrupción que alimenta los actos malvados, pero también puede ser en nuestro propio aborrecimiento que nos impulsa a ser mejores.

—He sido librada de haber robado a otras personas, hay otras personas que lo tendrán todo, tendrán lo que merecen tener. Supe eso antes de dejar la ciudad. ¿No sospechará usted que he tenido malos deseos hacia esas personas? —Habló dubitativamente.

—No había pensado en ellas —dijo Deronda—. He pensado más en otras cosas.

—Tal vez no conozca bien cómo empezó todo —dijo Gwendolen, lentamente, como si tuviera que vencer su repulsión—. Era con otra persona con la que tenía haberse casado. Y yo lo sabía, y le dije que yo no lo impediría. Y me marché; ahí es cuando usted me vio por primera vez. Pero entonces nos empobrecimos de golpe, y yo me sentía muy desgraciada, y fui tentada. Pensé: «Haré lo que quiero y lo arreglaré todo». Me persuadí a mí misma. Pero todo fue diferente. Todo fue horroroso. Entonces vino el odio y los pensamientos malvados. Así es como sucedió todo. Le dije que tenía miedo de mí misma. E hice lo que usted me dijo: intenté hacer de mi miedo una salvaguarda. Pensaba que ocurriría si yo… sentía que sucedería… cómo le temería a la mañana… queriendo que fuese siempre de noche… y aun así viendo siempre algo en la oscuridad… viendo la muerte. Si no sabía lo desgraciada que era, ahora usted ya lo conoce… pero ya no sirve de nada. No me tengo que preocupar de nada salvo que los demás no lo sepan… pobre mamá, que nunca ha sido feliz.

Hubo un nuevo silencio antes de que ella dijera con un sollozo reprimido:

—Usted no puede soportar verme más. Piensa que soy demasiado malvada. No cree que pueda mejorar… hacer algo que valga la pena… ser alguien que valga la pena… siempre seré demasiada malvada para… —La voz se quebró impotente.

Deronda sentía traspasado su corazón. Fijó los ojos en su pobre rostro suplicante y dijo:

—Creo que usted puede ser más útil de lo que nunca ha sido; es capaz de llevar una vida que puede ser una bendición. Ningún mal puede llevarnos a la desesperación salvo el mal que deseamos, y que deseamos continuar en él, y del que no hacemos ningún esfuerzo para librarnos. Usted ha hecho esfuerzos, continuará haciéndolos.

—Pero usted fue el que lo empezó. No debe abandonarme —dijo Gwendolen, apoyándose con sus manos juntas sobre el brazo del sillón y mirándole, mientras su rostro reflejaba los rasgos lastimeros de la experiencia vital concentrada en las últimas veinticuatro horas, esa nueva vida terrible con la que se encuentra un deseo criminal satisfecho—. Soportaré cualquier penitencia. Viviré la vida que usted me diga. Pero no debe abandonarme. Tiene que estar cerca de mí. Si usted hubiera estado cerca, si hubiera podido contárselo todo, habría sido diferente. ¿No me abandonará?

—Nunca decidiría hacer algo así —dijo Deronda enseguida, con esa voz que, como sus ojos, tenía el efecto no intencionado de hacer que su compasión pareciera más personal y especial de lo que realmente era. Y en ese momento presentía de alguna manera que tenía ese efecto incentivador. Su fuerte sentimiento por esta criatura afligida no le impedía imaginar un futuro difícil. Permaneció con los ojos clavados en ella mientras habló, pero con la dolorosa conciencia de que podía interpretar sus palabras como una promesa que algún día vería no cumplida: estaba haciendo una promesa indefinida a una esperanza indefinida. Varias inquietudes, tanto inmediatas como lejanas, se apoderaron de él, y fue bajo su influencia que, tras un momento de silencio, dijo:

—Espero que Sir Hugo Mallinger llegue como muy tarde mañana por la noche; y mantengo la esperanza de que la señora Davilow pueda hacer lo mismo en breve. Su presencia será el mejor consuelo que usted tenga, ¿será una buena razón para librarla de penas innecesarias?

—Sí, sí… lo intentaré. ¿Y usted no se marchará?

—No hasta que venga Sir Hugo.

—¿Pero iremos todos juntos a Inglaterra?

—Tan pronto como podamos —dijo Deronda, sin querer entrar en detalles.

Gwendolen miró de nuevo hacia la ventana con una expresión que parecía como un despertar de nuevos pensamientos. La luz del crepúsculo se hacía cada vez más tenue, pero Deronda notó el movimiento de sus ojos y sus

manos, igual que el que acompaña al retorno de la percepción de alguien que ha estado aturdido.

—¡Se quedará siempre con Sir Hugo! —dijo ella entonces, mirándole—. Siempre vivirá en la Abadía, o sino en Diplow.

—No estoy muy seguro dónde viviré —dijo Deronda, enrojeciendo.

Ella se dio cuenta por el cambio de su color que había hablado de una forma demasiado temeraria, y se calló. Después de un rato, comenzó, mirando hacia otro lado:

—Es imposible pensar cómo continuará mi vida. Ahora creo que sería mejor que fuera pobre y tuviera que trabajar.

—Vendrán nuevos retos con el paso de los días. Cuando se encuentre de nuevo entre sus amigos, discernirá sus nuevos deberes —dijo Deronda—. Tómese ahora como tarea mantenerse bien y en calma, tanto como pueda, antes de que… —Dudó.

—Antes de que venga mi madre —dijo Gwendolen—. ¡Ah! Debo estar muy cambiada. No me he visto. ¿Me habría conocido —añadió, volviéndose hacia él—, si me hubiera encontrado ahora? ¿Habría pensado que era la misma que vio en Leubronn?

—Sí, le habría conocido —dijo Deronda, con tristeza—. El cambio exterior no es muy grande. Habría visto enseguida que era usted, y que acababa de pasar por una gran aflicción.

—No me diga ahora que desearía no haberme conocido; no diga eso —dijo Gwendolen, implorante, a la vez que se le llenaban los ojos de lágrimas.

—Me despreciaría a mí mismo si pensara eso —dijo Deronda—. ¿Cómo podría saber lo que habría pensado? Debemos realizar nuestros deberes según lo que nos suceda, no según lo que pensamos que habría pasado. Si tuviera que desear algo tan estúpido como eso, no sería el no querer haberla conocido nunca, sino el ser capaz de haberla librado de esto.

—Me ha librado usted de cosas peores —dijo Gwendolen, entre sollozos —. Habría sido peor si no hubiera sido por usted. Si usted no hubiera sido bueno, yo habría sido más mala de lo que soy.

—Será mejor que me vaya ya —dijo Deronda, cansado de espíritu por la perpetua repetición de esta escena—. Recuerde lo que dijimos de su tarea: mantenerse bien y en calma antes de que vengan otros amigos.

Se levantó mientras hablaba, y ella le ofreció su mano sumisamente. Pero cuando le dejó, se dejó caer sobre sus rodillas en un llanto histérico. La

distancia entre ellos era demasiado grande. Era un alma proscrita, observando una posible vida que ella misma había rechazado.

Fue hallada de esta forma, aplastada contra el suelo. Tal dolor parecía natural en una pobre señora cuyo marido se había ahogado en su presencia.

LIBRO VIII

Fruto y semilla

Capítulo 58

> Ya sabía Dios que iba a haber complicaciones:
> él amaba y ella no.
>
> Nicholas Breton[282]

La extensión, ya lo sabemos, es una medida muy imperfecta de las cosas; y el recorrido del sol no puede decirnos cómo ha avanzado la vida más que la extensión de un campo puede decirnos qué es lo que crece en él. Un hombre puede ir hacia el sur, y al tropezarse con un hueso, puede meditar sobre él hasta que descubre un nuevo punto de partida para la anatomía; o hacia el este, y descubrir una nueva clave del lenguaje para contar la historia de las razas; o puede liderar una expedición que abra nuevas comunicaciones entre continentes, y por sus lesiones, convertirse en protagonista de poemas heroicos de determinación y resistencia; y al cabo de unos cuantos meses, puede regresar y ver que sus vecinos siguen quejándose como antes, o que el mismo caballero mayor le acompaña hablando por la acera, sacudiendo la cabeza ante el mismo chico de la carnicería, y deteniéndose ante el mismo escaparate para ver los mismos grabados. Si el pensamiento más rápido tiene la velocidad de un galgo, se supone que el más lento, debe moverse como las lapas, que parecen estar adheridas, pero que tras un buen rato se distingue una ligera progresión. Estas diferencias se manifiestan en la intensidad variable de lo que llamamos experiencia humana, desde el ímpetu revolucionario que nos cambia por dentro y por fuera, hasta esa repetición tranquila de lo familiar, que no tiene más épocas que aquellas del hambre y los cielos.

Algo de este contraste sucedió durante ese año que había convertido a la brillante y segura Gwendolen Harleth del Encuentro de Arqueros en la penitente abatida empujada a confesar su indignidad por no merecer la felicidad; mientras, su familia se había quedado en Pennicote sin más cambios que algunos hábitos externos, y algunos reajustes en las perspectivas y las intenciones por la reducción de los ingresos, las visitas y los halagos. La rectoría era un hogar tan agradable como antes: las peonías rojas y rosas sobre el césped, las filas de malvarrosas en los setos, habían florecido tan bien este año como el anterior: el rector conservaba su animada confianza en la benevolencia de sus superiores y su decisión de merecer su aprobación por la

diligencia en cumplir con sus deberes, se dieran cuenta o no; no hacía nada únicamente para promocionarse, excepto, tal vez, escribir un par de artículos eclesiásticos, que al no llevar firma, todo el mundo los atribuía a cualquier otra persona, salvo los superiores, a los que había mandado una copia especial, los cuales conocían ciertamente al autor pero no leían los artículos. El rector, sin embargo, no tenía ni más ligera sospecha sobre este punto: ponía notas marginales en estas copias especiales para entregarles un estudio más interesante, y le satisfacía que el Archidiácono y las demás autoridades no tuvieran nada que decir contra el tenor general de su argumentación. ¡Autoría pacífica!, al vivir al aire libre entre los campos y las colinas, y no en el meollo de la crítica, sin la eficiencia dantesca, pero alimentado con la complacencia, y tal vez con una sensación de producción más grande que la de una entera *Divina Comedia*. Además, el padre había recuperado su complacencia por su hijo favorito, una felicidad que era más grande que la pérdida de mil ochocientas libras al año. Cualquiera que fuese la naturaleza del cambio oculto operado en Rex por la decepción de su primer amor, aparentemente era bastante secundario respecto la evidencia de una ambición más seria que provenía de los infortunios de la familia; ciertamente, el señor Gascoigne estaba dispuesto a considerar el pequeño asunto que le había causado tanta ansiedad el año pasado como la evaporación de la humedad superficial, una especie de toque final al proceso de cocción que requiere la masa humana. Rex acababa de bajar a la rectoría para hacer una visita de verano, llevando a casa a Anna, y a la vez que se comportaba casi del todo con su antigua vivacidad con sus hermanos y hermanas, continuó en sus vacaciones con el hábito del estudio entusiasta, levantándose pronto por la mañana y retirándose pronto por las noches para seguir con su plan fijado de estudio.

—¿No te arrepientes de escoger las leyes como profesión, Rex? —le dijo su padre.

—No podía haber antepuesto ninguna profesión a esta —dijo Rex—. Me gustaría terminar mi vida siendo un juez de primera, y ayudar a formar un código. Le doy la vuelta a la famosa sentencia. Yo diría: «Dejadme a mí hacer las leyes, y ya habrá quien componga baladas»[283].

—Tendrás que recoger una inmensa cantidad de basura, supongo, eso es lo peor de todo —dijo el rector.

—No veo por qué las leyes basura son peores que la basura de cualquier otro tipo. No son tan malas como la literatura basura con la que la gente se embota la mente. No le hace a uno tan estúpido Nuestros hombres más

ingeniosos han sido a menudo abogados. Me parece mejor ver las cosas de una forma ordenada como casos y evidencias que una serie de chismes que ni dicen nada ni conducen a nada. Y, además, desde un punto de vista más elevado, los cimientos y el desarrollo de la ley constituyen los aspectos más interesantes de la filosofía y de la Historia. Por supuesto habrá una parte que será aburrida, pesada y tal vez exasperante. Pero las grandes conquistas en la vida no se consiguen fácilmente, así lo veo yo.

—Bien, hijo mío, el mejor augurio para el éxito en una profesión es verla como la mejor del mundo. Pero creo que sucede con cualquier trabajo cuando un hombre lo emprende con determinación. Brewitt, el herrero, me dijo el otro día que su aprendiz no se implicaba en el trabajo; «pero claro, señor —dijo Brewitt—, ¿qué esperamos si no le gusta trabajar de herrero?».

El rector sentía un orgullo paternal, que solo dejaba entrever con moderación. En cuanto a Warham, que había ido a la India, no le había costado dejarle marchar, pero Rex era ese romance de la vida tardía que un hombre encuentra a veces en un hijo al que reconoce como superior a él, imaginándoselo en el futuro como una eminencia, según varios ejemplos famosos. Solo fue a su mujer a quien le dijo con decisión:

—Rex será un hombre distinguido, Nancy, estoy seguro de ello, tan seguro como lo estaba el padre de Paley[284] de su hijo.

—¿Fue Paley un solterón? —dijo la señora Gascoigne.

—Eso no viene a cuento, querida —dijo el rector, que no recordaba ese detalle irrelevante. Y la señora Gascoigne sintió que había mostrado su debilidad al decir eso.

Esta forma tranquila de pasar el tiempo en la rectoría la compartía el grupo que había cambiado la dignidad marchita de Offendene por la casita blanca situada a menos de una milla, bien cercada por árboles de hoja perenne, y conocida por los aldeanos como «Jodson’s». El delicado rostro de la señora Davilow mostraba solamente un ligero incremento de su melancolía habitual, sus cabellos solo unas pocas canas más, consecuencia de los pleitos del último año; las cuatro niñas habían florecido un poco al no estar tan a la sombra; y la buena Jocosa conservaba su preciada neutralidad hacia los placeres y los encantos del mundo, que consideraba como cosas hechas para los que no estaban «en una situación».

La baja y estrecha sala de estar, alargada por dos originales ventanales salientes, con las rejillas abiertas de par en par en una tarde de julio recibiendo el aroma de las rosas del mes, los débiles murmullos del jardín, y

los sonidos ocasionales de los cascos de caballos y de ruedas de carros que parecían remarcar el pacífico silencio, constituían una escena animada y concurrida, teniendo en cuenta que Rex y Anna se habían unido al habitual grupo de seis personas. Anna, a la que querían mucho sus primas más jóvenes, tenía mucho que contar de su nueva experiencia y de la gente que conoció en Londres, y cuando vino sola por primera vez, le preguntaron muchas cosas sobre la casa de Gwendolen en la Plaza Grosvenor, qué había dicho la misma Gwendolen de ella, y qué habían dicho los demás sobre Gwendolen. ¿Había ido Anna a ver a Gwendolen al enterarse de que se iban a ir en yate? No. Una respuesta que dejaba libre la especulación con todo lo conectado con ese interesante navío desconocido más allá del hecho de que Gwendolen les había escrito antes de partir diciendo que el señor Grandcourt y ella iban a ir en yate por el Mediterráneo, y luego volvió a escribir desde Marsella diciendo que estaba segura de que le encantaría el viaje en yate, que las cabinas eran muy elegantes, y que probablemente no enviaría ninguna otra carta hasta que hubiera escrito en su diario una gran cantidad de *dittos*. Además, el desplazamiento del señor y la señora Grandcourt había sido mencionado en «el periódico»; así que esta nueva fase de la excitante vida de Gwendolen era una parte especial del gran romance de sus hermanas, e Isabel, la devoradora de libros, ya imaginaba que se enfrentarían con uno o dos piratas en una aventura que terminaría bien.

Pero cuando estuvo Rex presente, las chicas, según las instrucciones que les dieron, no sacaron a colación el tópico fascinante, y ese día solo hubo animadas descripciones de los Meyrick y de sus extraordinarios amigos judíos, lo cual suscitó preguntas asombradas por parte de algunas mentes para quienes la idea de judíos de verdad, no de libro, sugería una profunda diferencia casi zoológica, como si fuera una raza extraña de la Historia Natural de Plinio el Viejo[285] que pudiera dormir bajo la sombra de sus propias orejas. Bertha no podía imaginarse en qué creían ahora los judíos; y tenía una idea difusa de que rechazaban el Antiguo Testamento porque demostraba el Nuevo; la señorita Merry pensaba que «nunca podría discutir en serio con Mirah y su hermano», y a la amable Alice no le importaba lo que creyeran los judíos, estaba segura de que «no podría soportarlos». La señora Davilow la corrigió diciéndole que las grandes familias judías que estaban en sociedad se comportaban como debían tanto en Londres como en París, pero admitió que los judíos comunes no convertidos eran inaceptables; e Isabel

preguntó si Mirah hablaba como ellos, o si podías estar con ella y no descubrir que era judía.

Rex, que era del todo imparcial con los Israelitas, al haber conocido a un inoportuno judío que le había llenado la cabeza con las minucias de su historia antigua, se divertía exagerando jocosamente las ideas de cada uno, mientras Anna les suplicaba que entendieran que solo estaba bromeando, cuando las risas quedaron interrumpidas por una carta que llegó para la señora Davilow. Un mensajero la había traído corriendo a toda prisa desde la rectoría. Encerraba un telegrama, y mientras la señora Davilow lo leía y releía alterada y en silencio, todos los ojos estaban fijos en ella con ansiedad, pero ninguno se atrevía a hablar. Levantando al fin la vista y viendo los jóvenes semblantes «pintados de miedo» pensó que podían estar imaginándose algo peor que la verdad, algo así como su propio temor inicial que le hizo al principio incapaz de entender lo que había escrito, y dijo, con un sollozo que era casi un alivio:

—Queridos, el señor Grandcourt… —Hizo una pequeña pausa, y luego continuo—: El señor Grandcourt se ha ahogado.

Rex se puso en pie como si hubiera entrado de repente un misil en la habitación. No pudo evitarlo, y la primera mirada de Anna fue hacia él. Pero luego, controlándose un poco, mientras la señora Davilow leía lo que el rector había escrito en el telegrama, dijo:

—¿Hay algo que pueda hacer, tía? ¿Puedo llevar algunas palabras tuyas a mi padre?

—Sí, querido. Dile que estaré a punto, es muy bueno. Dice que irá conmigo a Génova; estará aquí a las seis. Jocosa y Alice, ayudadme a prepararme. Ella está a salvo… Gwendolen está a salvo… pero debe estar enferma. Estoy segura de que está muy enferma. Rex, querido, Rex y Ana, id y decid a vuestro padre que estaré preparada. Por nada del mundo perdería otra noche. Dadle ya las gracias por estar a punto tan pronto. Puedo viajar noche y día hasta que lleguemos allí.

Rex y Anna salieron corriendo bajo la solana, que de repente se convirtió en algo solemne para ellos, sin decirse una palabra entre ellos: ella iba sobre todo ansiosa por que no se abriera la herida de su hermano, y este luchaba con un tumulto de pensamientos que eran una ofensa para su buena voluntad. Los pensamientos se calmaron al llegar a la puerta de la rectoría, y dijo:

—Nannie, te dejo que se lo cuentes todo a mi padre. Si me llama, házmelo saber. Yo esperaré en el bosque diez minutos, solo diez minutos.

¿Quién no ha dejado volar egoístamente la imaginación, acariciando consecuencias codiciadas sobre su futuro a costa de la desgracia, la pena o la muerte de otro? La promoción esperada o la herencia es un tipo de tentación común que nada más materializarse en palabras o incluso en plegarias provoca un rechazo severo de los pensamientos más insistentes, y a veces llega uno a avergonzarse profundamente de ello, más que si de un compañero desagradable se tratase. Para la naturaleza de Rex, la vergüenza vino al instante, y se extendió como una luz horrible sobre las imágenes de lo que podría suceder, las cuales daban vueltas a la idea de que Gwendolen volvía a quedar libre, y se extendió sobre ellas, tal vez de forma más persistente porque cada rayo de esperanza era rápidamente contrarrestado por un obstáculo aún más imponente. Ante la imagen de «Gwendolen libre» se lazaba la visión impasible de «Gwendolen rica, exaltada, agasajada»; y si en la etapa anterior, cuando ambas vidas eran lozanas, ella se había apartado de su amor con repugnancia, ¿qué motivos había para creer que su corazón estaría más abierto hacia él en el futuro?

Estos pensamientos, a pesar de querer controlarlos y dejar a un lado, eran como un ruidoso tintineo del que no podía escapar corriendo. Durante ese último año, había conseguido llegar a un estado de calma, y ahora parecía que con solo tres palabras toda esa difícil tarea se venía abajo, colocándole de nuevo ante las fluctuaciones desdichadas de una añoranza que él mismo reconocía como desquiciante y desesperada. Y en este momento, la actividad de tal anhelo era tan inoportuna que se le hacía repulsiva. Perdonad al pobre Rex; no hacía mucho más que dieciocho meses desde que había sido abatido por una arquera que a menudo cargaba sus flechas con un sutil veneno de efectos prolongados. La decepción de una pasión juvenil tiene efectos tan incalculables como la viruela que puede convertir a una persona mediocre en un genio, a una menos mediocre en más estúpida, a otra precisamente en mediocre sin detrimento de su locura, o dejar tal vez a la mayoría sin cambios aparentes. Todo depende, no en el mero hecho de la decepción, sino en la naturaleza a la que afecta y la fuerza que la agita. Para la naturaleza bien dotada de Rex, aunque la esperanza había sido breve, la agitación pasional había calado hondo, y el efecto de la decepción fue del todo revolucionario, aunque de ella aprendió una nueva forma de vivir sin perder sus antiguas virtudes; en cierta manera, creía que había determinado su forma de ver las cosas. Ahora, sin embargo, parecía que su paz interior no era mayor que la

que tuvo la Florencia republicana, y que su corazón se movía al ritmo de esos timbres que espolean a los trabajadores.

El amor de Rex había sido como el que conocían y cantaban los antiguos: repentino, penetrante y asfixiante, y al proclamarlo de esta forma crearon una manera de hablar entre la gente de hoy en día cuya experiencia no tiene en absoluto ese carácter fiero y demoníaco. Tener la conciencia empapada de repente con la personalidad de otro, tener poseídas las inclinaciones más fuertes por una imagen dominante a pesar de que cambie y dejando a un lado si lo merece o no, y más aún, sentir una pasión agravada por las trágicas punzadas infringidas por una indignidad reorganizada y cruel, es una fase del amor que para los débiles y mediocres, tiene una semejanza repulsiva con su ciego animalismo, insensibles a las más alta influencia de la afinidad moral o de la admiración celestial. Pero cuando esta fuerza que atrapa se hace presente, no en una naturaleza bruta e inalterable, sino en una cuya dignidad puede comprometerse con seguridad, puede desembocar en una devoción perfectamente apropiada para ser llamada divina en un sentido más elevado que el de los antiguos. La flemática racionalidad se queda mirando y niega con la cabeza estas atracciones inexplicables, pero es tan innegable que existen como los vientos y las olas, causando aquí un naufragio y allí un viaje triunfal.

Este tipo de pasión había anidado en el fuerte y afable Rex, y había decidido llevarla como compañera, como si fuera un objeto sumamente querido, afligido y desvalido, que fuera a convertir el futuro de ternura en una sombrea del pasado. Pero también había decidido que su vida no iba a empobrecerse por haber renunciado a un tipo de alegría; más bien, había empezado de nuevo, recontando los tesoros que le quedaban, e incluso había sentido un descargo de poder como el que deja de temer de sí mismo.

Y ahora, ahí estaba, paseando por los arbustos, enojado consigo porque la sensación de irrevocabilidad de su suerte, que debería haber sido tan fuerte como siempre, había sido sacudida por un cambio de circunstancias que no cambiaban nada por lo que a él se refería. Se dijo cuál era la verdad amargamente:

«Ella nunca me amaría; y esa no es la cuestión, nunca podría acercarme a ella como pretendiente en su posición actual. La verdad es que no soy nadie, y probablemente no lo seré hasta que mis cabellos se vuelvan grises. ¿Pero qué tiene eso que ver? A ella no le importaría fuese lo que fuese, ni yo se lo pediría. Es mezquino pensar en eso ahora, peor que esconderse en el campo

de batalla para saquear a los muertos; no hubo jamás pecado más gratuito. No tengo nada que ganar allí, absolutamente nada… Entonces, ¿por qué no puedo encarar los hechos, y comportarme como se debe, en lugar de dejar que mi padre suponga que hay asuntos de los que no me puede hablar, aunque pueda ser útil en ellos?».

El último pensamiento le impulsó a entrar con firmeza en la casa y cruzar la puerta abierta del estudio, donde vio a su padre preparando la maleta de viaje.

—¿Puedo serle de ayuda, señor? —dijo Rex, con reanimado coraje, a la vez que su padre levantaba la vista hacia él.

—Sí, hijo mío; cuando me haya ido, mira mis cartas y contesta las necesarias, y tenme al cargo de todo. Dymock llevará la parroquia muy bien, y tú te quedarás con tu madre, o al menos, irás viniendo por aquí hasta que vuelva, sea cuando sea.

—Supongo que apenas estará fuera mucho tiempo —dijo Rex, atando una alfombrilla para el viaje en tren—. ¿Traerá a mi prima de vuelta a Inglaterra? —Se obligó a sí mismo a hablar de Gwendolen por primera vez, cosa que satisfizo al rector.

—Eso depende —contestó, dando por sentado que no había problema en hablar del tema—. Tal vez su madre se quede con ella allí, y yo pueda volver muy pronto. Este telegrama nos deja en una ignorancia bastante ansiosa. Pero sin duda los arreglos al testamento que se hicieron últimamente son satisfactorios, e incluso puede que nos encontremos con que esté por nacer un heredero. En cualquier caso, estoy seguro que Gwendolen va a estar muy bien provista, espléndidamente, espero.

—Tiene que haber sido una gran conmoción para ella —dijo Rex, más decidido ahora que había pasado la primera punzada—. Supongo que él era un marido consagrado.

—Sin ninguna duda —dijo el rector, con firme decisión—. Pocos hombres de su posición habrían hecho lo que él bajo esas circunstancias.

Rex nunca había visto a Grandcourt, nunca le había hablado de él nadie de la familia, y no sabía nada de la huida de Gwendolen de su perseguidor a Leubronn. Solo sabía que Grandcourt, estando muy enamorado de ella, se le había declarado en las primeras semanas de su repentina pobreza, y se había comportado de forma muy elegante al mantener a su madre y a sus hermanas. Todo eso era muy natural y era lo que al mismo a Rex le habría gustado hacer. Grandcourt había sido un tipo con suerte, y tuvo algo de felicidad antes de

ahogarse. Aun así, Rex se preguntaba si Gwendolen había estado enamorada de su exitoso pretendiente, o simplemente se había abstenido de decirle que odiaba ser cortejada.

Capítulo 59

> Nunca me considero más dichoso
> que cuando puedo recordar a mis buenos amigos.
>
> SHAKESPEARE[286]

SIR HUGO MALLINGER NO TUVO TANTA PRISA EN PARTIR PARA GÉNOVA COMO LA había tenido el señor Gascoigne, y Deronda no iba a marcharse de ninguna manera hasta no haber visto al baronet. La razón no era solo la muerte de Grandcourt, sino sobre todo la reciente crisis de su propia vida, por lo que su amigo más antiguo desearía tener una larga conversación con él, ya que al escribirle no había sido capaz de contarle nada sobre la madre que había venido y se había ido como una aparición. No fue hasta la quinta noche que Deronda, según el telegrama, fue a esperarle a la estación, donde iba a llegar entre las ocho y las nueve; y mientras esperaba con ganas volver a ver ese rostro amable, familiar, que era parte de sus primeros recuerdos, algo así como una sonrisa —a pesar de su trágica experiencia reciente— se había dibujado en sus ojos y en la curvatura de sus labios ante la idea de la satisfacción de Sir Hugo de ser ahora el dueño de sus fincas, pudiendo dejárselas en herencia a sus hijas, o al menos —según un punto de vista fuertemente impreso en la imaginación de Deronda— que pasara por sucesión femenina a un heredero que pudiera ser un nieto. Seríamos criaturas muy toscas si no pudiéramos compartir la alegría de nuestros compañeros mortales, a menos que fuera por nuestra teoría de la correcta distribución de la riqueza y de nuestro ideal de bien humano: ¡qué muecas más agrias formarían nuestros labios!, ¡qué miradas más heladas, nuestros ojos! Y además, nuestras propias posesiones y deseos no se ajustarían exactamente a nuestro ideal. Tenemos que aceptar algo la imperfección; y gracias a Dios, felizmente, es posible sentir gratitud incluso al darnos cuenta de un error que puede haber sido nocivo, cuando el vehículo del error es una intención cariñosa causada por las buenas acciones de toda una vida. Deronda no podía aceptar que Sir Hugo hubiera sido el causante de una falsedad —sí, una falsedad—; no podía llamar de una manera más suave la forma en que le habían ocultado las cosas a él. Pero el baronet probablemente no se habría planteado el abuso de confianza de la madre, y con su forma ligera y amable de tomarse la vida,

había visto razonable la preferencia de que su hijo creciera como un caballero inglés, al ver que su excentricidad llegaba al punto de no querer cuidar de su hijo, y hacerle creer que ella no existía. La gratitud afectuosa de Daniel hacia Sir Hugo le hacía desear encontrar motivos de excusa más que de culpabilidad; pues es tan posible ser rígido de principios y blando al culpar, como lo es sufrir a la vista de las cosas mal colgadas, y aúna sí ser paciente con el que las ha colgado mal. Si Sir Hugo antes de casarse había albergado la idea errónea de considerar a los hijos como un producto cuya finalidad es la de hacer la vida más agradable a los adultos, cuya comodidad dependía de disponer de ellos, ¡vaya!, había compartido ese supuesto, aunque no lo hubiera reconocido formalmente, y lo había llevado a cabo el día en que le acogió; y Deronda, con todos los recuerdos que tenía de la dolorosa lucha interior que había sufrido en su infancia, se acordaba también de los signos excluidos de su experiencia por la concepción de Sir Hugo. La amabilidad ignorante puede tomar la forma de crueldad; pero enfadarse con ella como si fuera la crueldad directa sería una forma de grosería ignorante, la forma más alejada de la indulgencia de Deronda hacia los demás. Y tal vez ahora, tras repasar las escenas de los últimos diez días, en los que se habían alzado los velos que ocultaban los secretos de las vidas que no eran como la suya, estaba más dispuesto que nunca a frenar el ímpetu de la indignación o el resentimiento, que tiene una desagradable semejanza con las ganas de castigar. Cuando vio la figura familiar de Sir Hugo descendiendo del vagón del ferrocarril, el afecto de una vida, acostumbrado a excusar, enterró cualquier conocimiento nuevo que hubiera podido justificar un motivo de culpabilidad.

—Bien, Dan —dijo Sir Hugo, con serio fervor, agarrando fuertemente la mano de Deronda. No pronunció más palabras que esas en su saludo; había una fuerte corriente de entendimiento entre ellos. Lo siguiente era dar órdenes al mensajero, y luego propuso dar un paseo lentamente, siendo suave la noche, y no habiendo prisa en llegar al hotel.

—El viaje me ha ido muy bien, y estoy en excelentes condiciones —dijo, mientras él y Deronda paseaban bajo la luz de las estrellas, débil todavía por el brillo decreciente del día—. No me di mucha prisa en partir, porque quería averiguar ciertas cosas, así que pude ver tu carta a Lady Mallinger antes de salir. Pero dime, ¿cómo está la viuda?

—Se está calmando —dijo Deronda—. Parece estar saliendo de la enfermedad corporal que cualquiera habría esperado, tras la inmersión y la

terrible emoción. Su tío y su madre llegaron hace dos días, y la están cuidando muy bien.

—¿Alguna expectativa de que nazca un heredero?

—Por lo que me dijo el señor Gascoigne, deduzco que no. Habló como si de ello dependiera las haciendas que pudiera tener la viuda en su vida.

—No significará mucho, me imagino, la pérdida de su marido —dijo Sir Hugo, volviéndose hacia Deronda.

—Le ha causado una gran impresión su muerte repentina —dijo Deronda, evadiendo el comentario.

—Me pregunto si Grandcourt le había mostrado cuál era su situación en el testamento —dijo Sir Hugo.

—¿Usted la conoce, señor? —inquirió Deronda.

—Sí —dijo el baronet rápidamente—. ¡Gad! Si no hay perspectivas de que haya un heredero legítimo, lo ha dejado todo a un chico que tuvo con una tal señora Glasher; supongo que no sabes nada del asunto, pero era una especie de amante que tuvo durante muchos años; y hay otros tres hijos, niñas. El chico va a heredar el título de su padre; ya se llama Henleigh, y ahora va a ser Henleigh Mallinger Grandcourt. Me alegra decir que el nombre de Mallinger no le va a ser de ninguna utilidad; pero el chaval va a tener más que suficiente hasta su minoría de catorce años, y no necesita tapar agujeros con mis cincuenta mil libras de Diplow, a las que no tiene derecho: y mientras tanto, mi belleza, la joven viuda, va a tener que conformarse con la pobre cantidad de dos mil libras al año y la casa de Gadsmere; un buen castigo si eligiera encerrarse allí, cosa que no creo que haga. La madre del chico ha estado viviendo allí los últimos años. Estoy muy disgustado con la decisión de Grandcourt. No creo que esté obligado a pensar mejor de él porque se haya ahogado, aunque en lo que a mis asuntos se refiere, no ha hecho nada mejor en su vida que abandonarla.

—En mi opinión se equivocó en casarse con su mujer, no en dejar sus bienes al hijo —dijo Deronda, más bien con brusquedad.

—No digo nada en contra de que deje las tierras al chico —dijo Sir Hugo —; pero dado que se casó con esta chica, debería haberla dejado con una buena provisión, para permitirle vivir conforme al rango a la que la había elevado al casarse con ella. Debería haberse quedado con cuatro o cinco mil libras al año y la casa de Londres durante el resto de su vida; eso es lo que yo habría hecho por ella. Supongo, que al estar sin dinero, sus amigos no se imaginaban que les tocaría algo, pues no vale la pena confiar en el testamento

que un hombre hace justo después de casarse. Incluso un hombre prudente deja generalmente constancia de su locura en su testamento (mi padre lo hizo, por ejemplo); y si una persona quiere despreciar realmente a alguien cercano o tiene algo en contra suya, va a utilizar probablemente ese documento para hacerlo. Resulta claro que Grandcourt quería que su muerte apagara del todo a su mujer, si esta no le daba herederos.

—Y en el caso contrario, supongo que la que habría resultado apagada sería la ilegítima —dijo Deronda, con cierto desprecio.

—Exacto: Gadsmere y las dos mil al año. Es raro. Me fastidia que Grandcourt me haya hecho su ejecutor testamentario; pero considerando que era el hijo de mi único hermano, no puedo negarme a actuar. Y me importaría menos si pudiera ser de alguna utilidad a la viuda. Lush cree que ella no ignoraba la presencia de la familia ilegítima, ni el propósito del testamento. Insinúa que la pareja no se entendía muy bien. Pero me imagino que tú eres el que sabías más sobre lo que sentía o no sentía la señora Grandcourt, ¿no, Dan? —Sir Hugo no formuló está pregunta con su jocosidad habitual, sino más bien con un tono bajo de interés indagatorio; y Deronda pensó que cualquier evasión sería malinterpretada. Contestó con gravedad:

—Ciertamente no era feliz. No estaban hechos el uno para el otro. Pero en cuanto a la distribución de la propiedad, por lo que he visto de ella, me atrevería a decir que estará bastante satisfecha.

—Entonces no se parece mucho a las de su sexo; es todo lo que puedo decir —dijo Sir Hugo, encogiéndose un poco de hombros—. Sin embargo, debería ser algo extraordinario, pues debe haber cierta relación entre tu horóscopo y el suyo, ¿eh? Cuando llegó el terrible telegrama, lo primero que dijo Lady Mallinger fue: «¡Qué extraño que sea Daniel el que lo envíe!». Pero a mí me ocurrió una vez una cosa parecida. Estaba en un hotel extranjero en el que había una dama a la que su marido no le había dejado dinero. Cuando me enteré, y me presté a ayudarla, me di cuenta de que era un antiguo amor mío de juventud, que había sido tan tonta como para casarse con un barón austríaco con mucho bigote y poco afecto. Pero era un asunto mío lo que me había llevado allí, nada que ver con la caballería andante, igual que nada tenía que ver tu estancia en Génova con los Grandcourt.

Hubo un silencio durante unos momentos. Sir Hugo había empezado a hablar de los Grandcourt, siendo el tema menos incómodo entre él y Deronda; pero ambos deseaban superar esa resistencia a mostrarse francos sobre lo que significaba la relación que había entre ellos. Deronda se dio cuenta de que su

carta, después de la primera entrevista con su madre, más que romper el hielo, lo había hecho aumentar de grosor, y que debía esperar que fuese Sir Hugo el que comenzara a debilitarlo. Justo cuando estaban perdiendo de vista el puerto, el baronet se giró, y deteniéndose como para mirarlo por última vez, dijo en un tono más serio:

—¿Y qué hay del motivo principal por el que viniste a Génova, Dan? No te ha apenado profundamente nada de lo que has oído, espero. ¿No hay nada que creas que cambie en tu posición? Ya sabes que todo lo que te pasa es para mí de suma importancia.

—Me encantaría abusar de su bondad confiándoselo todo, señor —dijo Deronda—. Pero no puedo responder a esas cuestiones con sinceridad simplemente con un sí o un no. Mucho de lo que he oído sobre mi pasado me ha apenado. Y me ha dolido encontrar a mi madre y que me obligase a separarme de ella, viéndola sufrir tanto. Pero no me supone pena alguna: es más bien un esclarecimiento de mis dudas, por lo cual me siento agradecido, sabiendo ya cuál es mi parentesco. En cuanto a lo que supone a mi posición, mi gratitud hacia usted no cambia nada, señor, por el cuidado y el afecto paternal que siempre me ha mostrado. Pero saber que nací judío puede tener una influencia trascendental en mi vida, que apenas puedo explicarle por el momento.

Deronda dijo la última frase con una determinación que superó cualquier falta de seguridad en sí mismo. Se daba cuenta de que poco a poco se iban a ir marcando más de lo que nunca había sido necesario las diferencias entre la naturaleza de Sir Hugo y la suya propia. El baronet lo miró de reojo y continuó caminando. Tras un momento de silencio, que aprovechó para revisar todo el material en sus recuerdos que le permitieran interpretar las palabras de Deronda, dijo:

—Hace tiempo que espero algo extraordinario de ti, Dan; pero, por el amor de Dios, ¡no se te ocurra meterte en excentricidades! Puedo tolerar la diferencia de opinión de cualquiera, pero que me la exponga sin que se vuelva un lunático. A estas alturas del mundo, si un hombre quiere ser tomado en serio, debe dejarse de melodramas. No me malinterpretes. No es que sospeche que la locura provenga de ti. Solo creo que te podría estar influenciando un lunático, sobre todo si es alguien que necesita protección. Te apasiona la gente que es atacada, Dan. Yo también siento lástima por ellos, pero en lo que se refiere a compañías, son un mal campo de elección. Sin embargo, no te pido que anticipes tu inclinación por las cosas que tengas que contarme.

Cuando decidas hacer algo que requiera dinero, tengo dieciséis mil libras guardadas para ti, más de lo que querrías tener como ingresos. Y ahora que he venido, supongo que desearás volver a Inglaterra lo antes posible.

—Tengo que ir primero a Mainz a por un cofre de mi abuelo, y tal vez a ver a un amigo de él —dijo Deronda—. Aunque el cofre ha estado allí durante estos veinte años, tengo cierta ansiedad nerviosa del todo irracional para tenerlo cuanto antes a mi cargo, como si fuera ahora más probable que le fuera a pasar algo. Y quizás estoy aún más nervioso porque me demoré cuando mi madre se fue, en vez de partir inmediatamente. Aun así no lamento no haberme ido: si no, la señora Grandcourt no habría tenido más que sirvientes para atenderla.

—Sí, sí —dijo Sir Hugo, con una frivolidad que era en realidad un escape al enojo que escondía bajo su seria forma de hablar—; espero que no vayas a sustituir a un judío muerto por un cristiano vivo.

Deronda enrojeció, y reprimió la réplica. Estaban ya regresando al *Italia*.

Capítulo 60

> Pero ya no diré nada más de esto por ahora; pues es algo que hay que sentir y no simplemente hablar de ello; y los que nunca lo tocaron con sus dedos puede que se rían de esto en su interior pero no ser los que más lo conocen.
>
> JEREMY TAYLOR[287]

> El emperador romano de la leyenda condenó a muerte a diez israelitas eruditos para vengar la venta de José por parte de sus hermanos. Y siempre habido quien pensara así, aquellos cuya piedad reside en el castigo, aquellos que ven la justicia del rencor pero no la de la gratitud. Pues nunca serás capaz de convencer al sentimiento más fuerte que no tiene la mayor razón, ni convencerás al que no tiene amor de que hay buenos motivos para amar. Tal como nos muestra el orden de la formación de las palabras, el *amor* precede a lo *amable*, lo que puede ser amado.

CUANDO DERONDA ENSEÑÓ SU CARTA EN LA CASA DE LA BANCA DE LA CALLE *Schuster* en Mainz, y preguntó por Joseph Kalonymos, le condujeron a una habitación interior en la que estaba sentado en una mesa despachando cartas abiertas el hombre de barba blanca que había visto el año anterior en la sinagoga de Frankfurt. Llevaba puesto su sombrero —parecía el mismo viejo sombrero de fieltro que lucía entonces— y cerca de él había una maleta de viaje con un manto y una gabardina encima de ella. Al ver entrar a Deronda se levantó, pero no dio ningún paso ni le tendió la mano. Mirándole con ojos escrutadores que brillaban como gemas negras en medio de su rostro amarillento y su cabello gris, dijo en alemán:

—¡Bien! Es usted ahora el que me busca a mí, joven.

—Sí, he venido a verle con gratitud, como amigo de mi abuelo —dijo Deronda—, y estoy en deuda con usted por molestarse tanto por mí. —Habló sin dificultad en esa lengua liberal alemana que reúne tantos acentos extranjeros en su seno materno.

Kalonymos le tendió ahora la mano y dijo cordialmente:

—¿Así que ya no le enoja ser algo más que un inglés?

—Al contrario. Le agradezco de corazón que me ayudase a librarme de permanecer en la ignorancia en cuanto a mi parentesco, y por guardar el cofre que mi padre le dejó confiado para mí.

—Siéntese, siéntese —dijo Kalonymos, en voz baja y hablando rápido, y se sentó de nuevo, a la vez que le señalaba una silla cercana. Luego, dejando a

un lado deliberadamente su sombrero y mostrando una espesa cabellera que cubría su cabeza, de pelo blanco, se acarició la barba, estirándosela de vez en cuando, mientras examinaba atentamente el joven semblante que tenía ante sí. La sensibilidad imaginativa de Deronda se disparó durante ese momento: ante la presencia de uno de los más celosos amigos del abuelo que tenía esperanzas en él incluso antes de que naciera, y que desde la ultratumba iba a hablarle a través de esas memorias escritas que, dice Milton, «contienen una fuerza de vida tan potente como la del alma de la que provienen»[288], le parecía estar tocando la cadena eléctrica de su propio linaje; y soportó la mirada escrutadora de Kalonymos con un respeto venerable, algo así como lo que se siente en la conmemoración solemne de actos hechos hace tiempo pero que todavía persisten en la vida presente. Es imposible para los hombres de pocas miras, hombres cuyo afecto no está preparado para extenderse más allá de toda imaginación, comprender ni dar crédito a esta sensibilidad de Deronda; pero existe, igual que la estupidez de estos hombres, a pesar de que no lo crean —y otorgaba a su rostro una expresión que parecía muy satisfactoria para el observador.

Dijo en hebreo, citando a uno de los bellos himnos de la liturgia hebrea: «Así como tu bondad ha sido grande con las generaciones anteriores, sea igual con las que han de venir». Luego, tras una pequeña pausa empezó:

—Joven, me alegro de no haber partido de nuevo en uno de mis viajes, y que haya usted llegado a tiempo para que yo pueda ver la imagen de mi amigo como era en su juventud, ya no pervertida por la compañía de su gente, ya no encogiéndose con orgullosa ira ante el contacto de aquel que parecía reclamarle como judío. Viene con agradecimiento a reclamar el lazo parentesco del que le despojó un artificio malvado. Viene con el alma deseosa para declarar: «Soy el nieto de Daniel Charisi». ¿No es así?

—Le aseguro que así es —dijo Deronda—. Pero déjeme decirle que en ningún momento de mi vida he tratado a un judío con desprecio porque fuera judío. Puede entender que me encogiera cuando tuve que decir a un extraño: «No sé nada de mi madre».

—¡Un pecado, un pecado! —dijo Kalonymos, levantando la mano y cerrando los ojos con aversión—. Un robo para nuestro pueblo, como cuando nuestros jóvenes y doncellas fueron criados para la Edom romana[289]. Pero ha sido impedido. Yo lo he impedido. Cuando Daniel Charisi, ¡que su Roca y Salvador le guarde!, cuando Daniel Charisi era un mozalbete y yo era un chiquillo que apenas le llegaba al hombro, hicimos una promesa solmene de

ser siempre amigos. Dijo: «Unámonos para cumplir juntos el mismo deber, como si fuéramos hijos de la misma madre». Ese fue su empeño desde el principio hasta el final, como dijo: fortificar su alma con vínculos. Solía decir: «Unamos el amor con el deber; pues es deber amar a la ley; y la ley es la naturaleza del Eterno». Así que nos comprometimos juntos. Y aunque luego estuvimos separados en nuestras vidas, la unión no se rompió nunca. Cuando estaba muerto, intentaron robarle, pero no contaban conmigo. Rescaté lo que quedaba y que él había guardado para su descendencia. Y yo le he restaurado la descendencia que le quitaron. Le traeré el cofre enseguida.

Kalonymos abandonó la sala por unos minutos, y volvió con un empleado que llevaba el cofre, lo depositó en el suelo, quitó la cubierta de piel, y se fue de nuevo. No era muy grande, pero era pesado por los braceros ornamentales y los pomos de acero dorado. La madera estaba grabada con letras arábigas.

—¡Bien! —dijo Kalonymos, volviendo a su sitio—. Y aquí tenemos la curiosa llave —añadió, cogiéndola de una pequeña bolsa de piel—. Trátelo con cuidado. Confío en que es usted metódico y cauto. —Observó a Deronda con esa mirada controladora y ligeramente desconfiada típica de la gente mayor cuando deja cualquier cosa a la juventud.

—Lo cuidaré más que cualquier otra propiedad —dijo Deronda, sonriendo y guardándose la llave en el bolsillo de su chaqueta—. Nunca había tenido nada que fuera un signo así de mis ansiadas esperanzas y esfuerzos. Y nunca olvidaré que parte del esfuerzo ha sido de usted. ¿Tiene tiempo para contarme más cosas de mi abuelo? ¿O me estoy entrometiendo demasiado permaneciendo aquí?

—Quédese aquí unos días. Dentro de una hora y dieciocho minutos salgo para Trieste —dijo Kalonymos, mirando su reloj—, y luego mis hijos reclamarán mi atención. ¿Me permitirá entonces que le conozcan, para que puedan tener el placer de mostrar su hospitalidad al nieto de mi amigo? Viven aquí con todo lujo y comodidad, aunque yo elegí ser un vagabundo.

—Me encantará conocerlos en otra oportunidad futura —dijo Deronda—. Me reclaman con urgencia en Inglaterra, amigos que pueden necesitarme. He estado apartado de ellos demasiado tiempo por unas circunstancias inesperadas. Pero saber más de usted y de su familia sería motivo suficiente para volver de nuevo a Mainz.

—¡Bueno! Es difícil que vuelva a encontrarle, pues ya paso de los setenta años, y soy un trotamundos, y llevo la mortaja conmigo. Pero mis hijos y sus niños viven aquí juntos llenos de riquezas. Los días han cambiado para

nosotros desde que Carlomagno sacó a mis antepasados de Italia para llevar un poco de conocimiento a nuestros rudos hermanos alemanes. Yo y mis contemporáneos hemos tenido que pasar por eso también. Nuestra juventud coincidió con los peores días; pero al final ganamos; nos hicimos más ricos, y todo el conocimiento que tiene Alemania se ha alimentado de muchos cerebros judíos, aunque no siempre conservan su corazón judío. ¿No le ha contado nadie la historia de su pueblo, joven?

—No —dijo Deronda—, en los últimos tiempos, antes de que tuviera la más mínima sospecha de mi parentesco, algo me llevó a estudiar todo lo relacionado con su historia con más ahínco que cualquier otro tema. Parece que estaba preparándome para entender un poco a mi abuelo. —Estaba ansioso para que no se les acabara el tiempo antes de poder volver al tema que más le preocupaba. La edad no distingue fácilmente entre lo que necesita expresar y lo que la juventud necesita saber, la distancia parece nivelar los objetos del recuerdo; y por lo profundamente activo que se mostraba Joseph Kalonymos, una pincelada en el momento erróneo habría impedido que su imaginación volviera de Beyrout: estaba acostumbrado a relacionar los viajes incansables con observaciones formales. Pero la última frase de Deronda respondió a este propósito.

—Así que habría usted sido un hombre como él si su educación no se lo hubiera impedido; pues es como él en los rasgos: pero no en todos, joven. Mostraba una voluntad de hierro en su semblante: animaba a todo el mundo. Cuando era joven su ceja ya se marcaba de una forma especial. No veo nada de eso en usted. Daniel Charisi solía decir: «Mejor una voluntad equivocada que un dubitativo; mejor un enemigo acérrimo que un amigo dudoso; mejor una creencia falsa que no tener ninguna creencia en absoluto». Lo que más despreciaba era la indiferencia. Tenía muchas más razones de las que puedo darle.

—¿Pero sus conocimientos no eran escasos? —dijo Deronda, con una referencia tácita a la excusa habitual para la indecisión: que proviene de saber demasiado.

—¿Escasos? No —dijo Kalonymos, sacudiendo la cabeza con una sonrisa compasiva—. Desde su infancia, su alimento era el estudio, como lo es el agua de las plantas. Pero pronto se aficionó a la medicina y a las teorías sobre la vida y la salud. Viajó a muchos países, y pasó gran parte de su tiempo viendo y conociendo. En lo que solía insistir era en que la fuerza y la riqueza de la humanidad dependía del equilibrio entre la independencia y la

comunicación, y estaba totalmente en contra de que nuestra gente se perdiera entre los gentiles; «No es mejor —decía— que el retorno de muchos tipos de grano de la variedad a la igualdad». Mezclaba todo tipo de conocimientos; y en eso era como nuestros escritores arábigos de la edad de oro. Estudiábamos juntos, pero él iba por delante. A pesar de ser amigos íntimos, y se volcaba plenamente en mí, éramos tan diferentes como el interior y el exterior de un cuenco. Llegué a no tener opiniones propias: para mí lo que decía Charisi era como la forma de los árboles: estaban allí, y nadie lo discutía. Nos pasaba lo mismo a ambos; éramos judíos llenos de fe, agradecidos de no ser gentiles. Y desde que fui un hombre maduro, he sido lo que soy ahora, todo salvo la edad: me gusta vagabundear, las transacciones, observarlo todo, y no preocuparme por las dificultades. Charisi pensaba continuamente en el futuro de nuestro pueblo: se concentraba con toda su alma en esa parte de nuestra religión; yo, no. Mientras tengamos libertad, ya estoy contento. Nuestro pueblo erraba antes de que fuera conducido. Joven, cuando yo estaba en el este, me quedaba muchas veces sobre la cubierta para mirar las estrellas. Su vista me satisface. Las reconozco a medida que se elevan en el cielo, y no necesito saber más. A Charisi no le importaba no ver nada del presente, pues encajaba las piezas con lo que había ocurrido antes y lo que iba a ocurrir. Pero nos queríamos, y como decía él, unía nuestro amor con el deber; prometimos solemnemente ayudarnos y defendernos mutuamente hasta el final. Yo he cumplido mi promesa. —Al decir esto, Kalonymos se levantó, y Deronda, levantándose también, dijo:

—Y al haberle sido fiel a él, me ha hecho justicia a mí. Habría sido un robo también para mí no haber sabido nunca la herencia que él me había preparado. Se lo agradezco con toda mi alma.

—Sea digno de él, joven. ¿Cuál es su vocación? —La cuestión fue formulada con una rápida brusquedad que violentó a Deronda, que no creía que fuese honesto alegar la lectura de la ley como vocación. Respondió:

—No puedo decir que tenga ninguna.

—Consiga una, consiga una. El judío debe ser hacendoso. ¿Se considerará usted judío y profesará la fe de sus padres? —dijo Kalonymos, poniendo su mano sobre el hombre de Deronda y escudriñando su rostro.

—Me consideraré un judío —dijo Deronda, deliberadamente, y palideciendo bajo los ojos escrutadores de su observador—. Pero no creo que profese exactamente la fe que profesaron mis padres. Nuestros padres mismos cambiaron el horizonte de sus creencias y aprendieron de otras razas. Pero

creo que puedo mantener la noción de mi abuelo del aislamiento con comunicación. Mantengo que mi primer deber es hacia a mi propio pueblo, y si algo puede hacerse para restaurar o perfeccionar su vida ordinaria, haré de eso mi vocación.

A Deronda le había ocurrido en esos momentos, como a veces les ha ocurrido a otros, que la necesidad de hablar marcó su decisión. El respeto que sentía hacia el que le hizo la pregunta le impedía dejarle sin respuesta, y en la necesidad de contestar encontró la verdad por él mismo.

—Ah, discute y tiene esperanzas —es usted el nieto de Daniel Charisi— dijo Kalonymos, añadiendo una bendición en hebreo.

De esa forma se despidieron; y para cuando Deronda llegó a Londres, el hombre mayor estaba de nuevo en un barco, saludando a las amigables estrellas sin curiosidad ansiosa.

Capítulo 61

> El Amor anida bajo el corazón tierno,
> como lo hacen los pájaros bajo las verdes sombras de los bosques,
> antes del corazón tierno, no había Amor en el esquema de la Naturaleza,
> ni existían los corazones tiernos antes del Amor.
>
> GUIDO GUINIZELLI[290]

HABÍA OTRA CASA ADEMÁS DE LA BLANCA CASA DE PENNICOTE, OTRO PECHO ADEMÁS del de Rex Gascoigne, en el que las noticias de la muerte de Grandcourt causaron tanto una fuerte excitación como el esfuerzo de reprimirla.

Hans Meyrick tenía por costumbre enviar o traer él mismo el *Times* para que lo leyera su madre. Ella leía todo tipo de noticias, desde las de política de todas partes hasta la lista de matrimonios; lo último, decía, le daba la agradable sensación de acabar las novelas de moda sin tener que leerlas, y viendo que los protagonistas eran felices sin saber lo desgraciados que eran. Los miércoles siempre había razones para que Hans decidiera ir él mismo a por el periódico, y lo hacía más o menos cuando Mirah estaba a punto de acabar la lección semanal que impartía a Mab, y confesaba que llegaba entonces porque quería oír cantar a Mirah. Pero el miércoles en cuestión, tras entrar en la casa moviendo el picaporte tan silenciosamente como siempre, apareció en el recibidor agitando el *Times* en el aire con un ruido crujiente, sin remordimientos por interrumpir el intento de Mab de que el *Lascia ch'io pianga*[291] se pareciera remotamente a la interpretación de su maestra. Piano y canto cesaron inmediatamente; Mirah, que estaba tocando el acompañamiento, se levantó involuntariamente y se dio la vuelta, pues el ruido, entre todos los demás pequeños sonidos, le había parecido algo atronador; y Mab dijo:

—¡Oh, Hans! ¿Cómo es que nos traes un ruido más horrible que mi canto?

—¿Cuáles son las maravillosas noticias que traes? —dijo la señora Meyrick, que era la única otra persona en la habitación—. ¿Algo sobre Italia, algo sobre los austríacos dejando Venecia?

—Nada sobre Italia, pero algo de Italia —dijo Hans, con una peculiaridad en su tono de voz y en sus formas que hizo que su madre se pusiera

inmediatamente a interpretarlo. Imaginad como nos sentimos y nos comportamos algunos de nosotros cuando un suceso, no desagradable, parece confirmar y llevar a cabo nuestras estructuras privadas. Decimos: «¿Qué opinas?» en un tono elocuente a cierta persona inocente cuyos conocimientos no van en la misma línea que los nuestros, y encuentra débil nuestra información.

—¿Nada malo? —dijo la señora Meyrick con ansiedad, pensando inmediatamente en Deronda; y el corazón de Mirah se había encogido también con el mismo pensamiento.

—Nada malo para nadie que nos importe mucho —dijo Hans, rápidamente—; más bien algo inusualmente afortunado, creo. Nunca conocí a nadie que muriera tan a propósito. Teniendo en cuenta lo que llego a moverme, me sorprende que todavía yo siga vivo.

—¡Oh, por favor, Hans! —dijo Mab con impaciencia—, si tienes que hablar de ti mismo, que sea luego. ¿Qué es lo que ha pasado?

—El duque Alfonso se ha ahogado, y la duquesa está viva, eso es todo —dijo Hans, poniendo el periódico ante la señora Meyrick, con su dedo en un párrafo—. Pero lo mejor es que Deronda estaba en Génova en el mismo hotel que ellos, y la vio mientras los pescadores la traían, los cuales la habían rescatado de las aguas a tiempo para salvarla de cualquier daño. Parece que la vieron saltar cuando su marido cayó, lo cual fue una acción menos juiciosa de lo que habría cabido esperar de la duquesa. No obstante, Deronda es un tipo afortunado al haber estado allí y haber podido cuidar de ella.

Mirah se había dejado caer de nuevo en el taburete del piano, con los ojos cerrados y las manos apretadas con fuerza; y la señora Meyrick, entregando el periódico a Mab, dijo:

—¡Pobrecilla! Debía querer mucho a su marido para haber saltado después de que él cayera.

—Fue un descuido, un despiste momentáneo —dijo Hans, arrugando el rostro con picardía, y dejándose caer en una silla no lejos de Mirah—. ¿Quién puede querer a un barítono celoso, con miradas glaciales, siempre cantando de lado? Ese era el papel del marido, depende cómo se mire. Nada puede resultar mejor que se haya ahogado. La duquesa es ahora libre para casarse con un hombre con una hermosa cabellera, cuya mirada la derretirá en vez de congelarla. Y a mí me invitarán a la boda.

En esto, Mirah se levantó de su asiento, y con los ojos clavados en Hans, los cuales traslucían un gran enojo, dijo, con profunda voz indignada:

—Señor Hans, no debería hablar de esta manera. El señor Deronda no querría que hablara así. ¿Por qué dice que es afortunado, por qué usa palabras de ese tipo sobre la vida y la muerte, cuando lo que es vida para uno es muerte para el otro? ¿Cómo sabe que sería afortunado si amara a la señora Grandcourt? Puede ser una gran desgracia para él. Ella le apartaría de mi hermano, sé que lo haría. El señor Deronda no definiría como afortunado traspasar el corazón de mi hermano.

A los tres les sorprendió la repentina transformación. El rostro de Mirah, con una mirada de enojo digna de Ithuriel[292], pálido incluso hasta los labios que normalmente eran tan coloridos, no estaba lejos del pobre Hans, sentado y paralizado, enrojeciendo como si fuera una niña, que a su vez dijo nerviosamente:

—Soy un estúpido y un bruto, y retiro cada una de mis palabras. Iré a ahorcarme como Judas, si se me permite mencionarle. —Incluso en los momentos de arrepentimiento, las palabras improvisadas de Hans tenían algo de socarronería.

Pero el enojo de Mirah no se apaciguó: ¿cómo iba a calmarse? Había explotado indignada como muerden las criaturas bajo un intenso dolor y llegan incluso a tocarse los dientes atravesando la carne, para poder soportar mejor su agonía. No dijo nada más, pero, sentándose ante el piano, alisó las partituras que tenía a su alcance como si pensara empezar a tocar.

Fue Mab la que rompió el silencio. El rostro de la señora Meyrick parecía reflejar parte del malestar de Hans.

—Mirah hace bien en reprenderte, Hans. Siempre tomas el nombre del señor Deronda en vano. Y es horrible, bromear de esa manera sobre su matrimonio con la señora Grandcourt. Creo que la mente de los hombres debe ser muy oscura —concluyó Mab, con gran desprecio.

—Muy cierto, querida —dijo Hans, en voz baja, levantándose y caminando hacia la ventana trasera que había detrás de él.

—Sería mejor que continuáramos, Mab; no hemos acabado la lección —dijo Mirah, en un tono más alto de lo normal—. ¿Quieres cantar esto otra vez, o prefieres que te lo cante yo?

—Oh, por favor, cántamelo —dijo Mab, contenta de no tener que hablar más de lo que había pasado.

Y Mirah inmediatamente cantó el *Lascia ch'io pianga*, enfatizando los sollozos y los lloros de la melodía con nueva fuerza y energía. Hans se detuvo y se apoyó contra la chimenea, cuidando de mantener la mirada lejos de la de

su madre. Cuando Mirah hubo cantado y tocado la última nota se levantó y dijo:

—Ahora debo irme casa. Me espera Esdras.

Le dio la mano en silencio a la señora Meyrick, sin acercarse mucho y sin atreverse a mirarla, en vez de darle un beso como hacía siempre. Pero la pequeña madre la atrajo hacia ella, y dijo suavemente:

—Que Dios te bendiga, querida. —Mirah creía que había cometido una ofensa contra la señora Meyrick al reprender de esa forma tan enojada a Hans, y junto con el resto de su sufrimiento tenía ahora la sensación de haber mostrado un poco de orgullosa ingratitud, una impropia reivindicación de superioridad. Y su amiga había adivinado estos escrúpulos.

Mientras, Hans se había rehecho, y se disponía a abrir la puerta.

—Escucha, Hans —dijo Mab, con lo que era realmente la ternura de una hermana astutamente disfrazada—, no vas a regresar a casa con Mirah. Estoy segura de que ella preferiría no hacerlo. Hoy estás terriblemente desagradable.

—Iré para cuidarla, si no me lo impide —dijo Hans, abriendo la puerta.

Mirah no dijo nada, y cuando le hubo abierto la puerta exterior y la cerró tras él, caminó a su lado sin que se lo prohibiera. Ella no se atrevía a empezar a decirle cosas otra vez, consciente de que tal vez había sido indecorosamente severa con sus palabras, aunque solo encontraba palabras aún más severas que las anteriores en su corazón. Además, se sentía presionada por una multitud de pensamientos que se revelaban como los intérpretes de esa consciencia que todavía no se atrevía a expresar.

Hans, por su parte, tenía también muy ocupada la mente. El enfado de Mirah había despertado en él una nueva percepción, y con ella la desagradable sensación de ser un idiota por no haberse dado cuenta antes. El corazón de Mirah podía estar totalmente preocupado por otro personaje además de Deronda, el benefactor de su hermano; la suposición le provocó una ansiedad que, para hacerle justicia, no era del todo egoísta. Tenía una fuerte convicción, que solo la evidencia directa contraria podía haber disipado, y era que había una fuerte adhesión entre Deronda y la señora Grandcourt; había atado cabos recordando fragmentos de conversación, y poco a poco había ido reuniendo información, completada por lo que sus hermanas habían oído de Anna Gascoigne, que le convenció no solo de que la señora Grandcourt tenía una pasión por Deronda, sino también, a pesar de la austera autorepresión de su amigo, que la sensibilidad de Deronda hacia ella era el signo de un amor escondido. Algunos hombres, con una convicción así,

habrían evitado alusiones que pudieran fomentar tal sensibilidad; pero la charla de Hans fluía de forma natural siempre hacia las travesuras, como si experimentara en irritar a sus amigos en broma. Sus experimentos terminaban confirmándole que lo que él creía probable era cierto.

Por otra parte, la sensibilidad que Deronda había manifestado hacia Mirah, que cualquier otro habría reconocido como amorosa, Hans la explicaba por la siguiente razón: su posición dependiente; pues sabía que su amigo sentía una ansiedad desinteresada por todos aquellos a los que pudiera ayudar y proteger. Y la insistencia de Deronda de que Mirah nunca se casaría con alguien que no fuera judío le excluía necesariamente a él, dado que Hans compartía la opinión general —y no conocía nada que la contradijera—, que Deronda era el hijo de Sir Hugo Mallinger.

Así que creía conocer a fondo el estado de los afectos de Deronda; pero ahora, los sucesos que realmente le hacían creer que concurrían hacia la deseable unión con la señora Grandcourt, habían desembocado en una repentina revelación por parte de Mirah, una traición de su sentimiento pasional sobre este tema que les había llenado de melancolía tanto a ella como a él, aunque la melancolía no era tanta como si hubiera imaginado que las esperanzas de Deronda estaban puestas en ella. No es sublime, sino normal, que un hombre lleve con más fortaleza y menos celos el ver triste a la persona que ama porque su rival ame a otra, que el verla totalmente feliz a causa de su rival. Al menos sucedía esto con el veleidoso Hans, que fluctuaba entre los contradictorios estados de sentimiento de hallarse abatido porque Mirah estaba abatida, y de estar casi agradecido a Deronda por amar a otra persona. Le resultaba imposible dar a Mirah ningún signo directo acerca de la manera en la que había interpretado su enfado, pero anhelaba que su compañía silenciosa fuera lo suficiente elocuente en una conmiseración tierna y penitente, que es una forma admisible de cortejar un corazón herido.

De esta forma, los dos siguieron el uno al lado del otro en una compañía que parecía una exaltada comunicación, como la de dos cuerdas cuyas rápidas vibraciones se escapan de nuestros oídos. Pero cuando alcanzaron la puerta de la casa de Mirah, y Hans dijo «Adiós», tendiéndole la mano con una suplicante mirada de penitencia, ella captó esa mirada con melancólica amabilidad, y dijo:

—¿No va a pasar dentro a ver a mi hermano?

Hans no pudo interpretar esta invitación más que como un signo de perdón. No conocía lo suficiente cómo había sido moldeada la naturaleza de

Mirah durante sus experiencias tempranas para adivinar que la misma fuerza de su reciente excitación le había hecho aceptar más rápidamente el dolor. Cuando él había dicho «si me lo permite», y se marcharon juntos, la mitad de la pena ya se había ido, y ya estaba dándole vueltas a la posibilidad de un romance y de cómo podría hacer que su entrega fuera indispensable para Mirah, de la misma manera que Deronda se estaba entregando en otra parte. Esto era del todo justo, pues su amigo actuaba según se propio corazón; y sobre la cuestión del judaísmo, Hans se sentía del todo seguro: ¿quién ha oído en algún cuento o en la historia que el amor de una mujer fuera parejo con su raza o su religión? Las damiselas musulmanas o judías siempre se han sentido atraídas por los cristianos, y si ahora el corazón de Mirah se había inclinado precipitadamente hacia Deronda, era otro caso que demostraba su teoría. Hans estaba habituado a que sus propios argumentos le complacieran, era un Giaour[293], la antítesis de lo que debía ser su alma; pero creía un poco en las cosas de las que se reía. Y de esta forma, sus esperanzas etéreas, fundadas en principios muy débiles, se remontaban de nuevo a pesar de tener todas las circunstancias en contra.

Hallaron a Mardoqueo más contento de lo normal, con una carta cerrada entre las manos; sus ojos brillaban con un triunfo sosegado, que en su rostro demacrado daba la idea de haber vencido el ataque de la muerte. Tras los saludos entre él y Hans, Mirah le rodeó el cuello con su brazo y miró la carta que tenía en la mano, sin atreverse a preguntar por ella, aunque estaba segura que era la causa de su felicidad.

—Una carta de Daniel Deronda —dijo Mardoqueo, contestando a su mirada—. Breve, solo dice que espera volver pronto. Un suceso repentino le ha retenido. La promesa de volver a verle es para mí como el arco entre las nubes[294] —continuó Mardoqueo, mirando a Hans—; y para usted debe ser una alegría. ¿Pues quién tiene un segundo amigo como él?

Mientras Hans contestaba Mirah se escurrió a su propia habitación; pero no para desfogarse en un arrebato pasional. Si admitiéramos que los ángeles pueden entrar a observar el tocador de las mujeres, y hubieran entrado a la pequeña habitación con ella y hubieran cerrado la puerta tras ellos, solo la habrían visto sacarse el sombrero, sentarse y presionarse las sienes con las manos como si de repente se hubiera dado cuenta de que le dolía la cabeza; luego se levantó para echarse agua fría a los ojos, a las cejas y al cabello hasta que sus rizos morenos estuvieron llenos de gotas cristalinas, y al secarse las cejas parecía una flor recién abierta entre las demás plantas cubiertas de rocío

del bosque; entonces, dejó escapar unos profundos suspiros de alivio, y poniéndose sus pequeñas zapatillas, se sentó todavía un par de minutos más, que le parecieron tan largos, tan repletos de las cosas que habían de suceder, que se levantó con aspecto de haber recordado muchas más cosas, y bajó a preparar el té.

Algo de la antigua vida había vuelto. Estaba habituada a recordar que debía aprender su papel, ir a los ensayos, actuar y cantar por las noches, esconder sus sentimientos acerca de su padre; y cuanto más dolorosa se le hacía la vida, tanto más se había habituado a esconderse. La fuerza de su naturaleza había encontrado desde hacía tiempo su acción principal en la resistencia decidida, y la violencia sentimental de hoy que le había causado su primer impulso de enojo se había transformado rápidamente en el firme afrontamiento del dolor, un viejo conocido desde hacía muchos años. Pero mientras se movía y hablaba como siempre, un observador perspicaz habría notado una diferencia entre esta calma aparente, que era efecto de reprimir energía, y la calma dulce y genuina de los meses en los que sintió que volvía por primera vez su felicidad infantil.

Aquellos que han sido bien tratados por la fortuna, y que siempre han pensado que las desgracias solo les pasan a los demás, sienten una rabia ciega e incrédula cuando la tortilla da la vuelta, y medio se creen que sus gritos salvajes alterarán el curso de la tormenta. Mirah no se sorprendió de esa manera cuando la conocida Pena regresó tras una larga ausencia, y se sentó con ella de acuerdo con los viejos tiempos y costumbres. Y este hábito de esperar penas más que alegrías, le impedía tener ninguna esperanza persistente en contra de las probabilidades que no solo fueron sugeridas por Hans, sino que su propio conocimiento y el presentimiento cada vez más grande que tenía desde hacía tiempo confirmaban. Creía con certeza que se produciría un compromiso entre Deronda y la señora Grandcourt, que terminaría en matrimonio. No había que culparlo de nada: los hechos se habían dado de forma que apareciera un vínculo entre él y esta mujer que pertenecía a un mundo distinto al suyo y al de Esdras —no, que parecía un tipo de persona muy distinta a Deronda, un ser ajeno que sería una carga para su vida en vez de una perfecta fusión—. Bueno, está bien, pero si al menos esta relación se hubiese demorado en el tiempo para que no afectase a su hermano mientras este todavía viviese… Ella no conocía toda la trascendencia de la relación entre Deronda y su hermano, pero había visto y sentido instintivamente lo suficiente para presagiar su incongruencia con

cualquier vínculo cercano a la señora Grandcourt; al menos así es como revistió Mirah al principio su repugnancia mortal. Pero en la rápida acción de su consciencia, los pensamientos se sucedían como estados cambiantes de sensaciones inviolables gracias a sus actos habituales; y este lenguaje interior pronto le convenció de que la repugnancia mortal permanecería incluso si Esdras estuviera a salvo de perderlo.

«Lo que he leído, cantado y visto en escena me está sucediendo a mí: esto que siento es el amor de los celos», de una forma tan imparcial Mirah resumía los cargos contra ella. ¿Pero qué importaba su dolor a los demás? Debía conservarlo para ella sola, oculto, como el anhelo y devoción que sentía por su difunta madre de pequeña. Pero al contrario que esa devoción, era algo que sentía como un infortunio de su naturaleza: descubrir que lo que habría tenido que ser puro agradecimiento y reverencia se había convertido en pena egoísta, que el sentimiento que hasta entonces estaba encantada de expresar con palabras se había degradado en algo que le avergonzaba traicionar, la absurda añoranza de que ella que lo había recibido todo sin entregar nada debía ser importante cuando ella no tenía importancia ninguna, el sentimiento de enojo hacia una mujer que poseía el bien que ella quería. ¿Pero qué es lo que había pasado, de dónde salían esas vanas esperanzas que habían permanecido escondidas y que ahora se mostraban a la vista ardiendo en forma de decepciones y celos? Era como si su alma se hubiera rebozado de la pasión venenosa en profundos sueños olvidados, y ahora aflorara en este sufrimiento inexplicable. Pues de forma consciente nunca había llegado a pensar lo que parecía la atrevida e inapropiada idea de que Deronda pudiese amarla. El desasosiego que había sentido antes era comparativamente vago y fácilmente explicable como parte de la tristeza que le producía que Deronda no fuese más que un visitante del mundo de ella y de su hermano, tan diferente del mundo de él como lo era un pórtico con luces y lacayos de una puerta de una tienda de campaña, en la que el único esplendor proviene del brillo inaccesible de las estrellas. Pero su sentimiento ya no era vago: la causa de su dolor, la imagen de la señora Grandcourt al lado de Deronda, llevándoselo cada vez más lejos a la distancia, era tan clara como si fueran tenazas apretándole su propia carne. En el interior psíquico de Mirah quedaba aún una ferviente emoción, y que a veces parecía más bien propia de una Cleopatra; sus impresiones tenían la minuciosidad y tenacidad que dan a la primera selección del sentimiento pasional el carácter de una fidelidad para siempre. Y ahora había aparecido una selección, y dio al amor un cruel sentimiento de

celos: ella estaba acostumbrada a sentir una fuerte repugnancia hacia ciertos objetos que la rodeaban, y a mantenerse apartada interiormente de ellos aunque la estuviesen tocando. Y ahora su repugnancia se concentraba en la señora Grandcourt, a la que atribuía involuntariamente más maldad de la que le conocía. «Podría volver a soportarlo todo, pero esto es peor, ¡al menos antes no tenía sentimientos horribles!» dijo la pobre chica en un elevado susurro a su almohada. ¡Qué extraño que tuviera que rezar en contra de cualquier sentimiento que concerniese a Deronda!

Pero había llegado a esta conclusión una noche que pasó atendiendo a Mardoqueo, cuya exaltación ante la perspectiva de ver de nuevo a su amigo, le predispuso a exteriorizar muchos pensamientos en voz alta a Mirah, aunque tal comunicación era a menudo interrumpida por intervalos aparentemente reservados para pensamientos internos que animaban sus ojos y dejaban descansar en silencio a sus labios. Le daba vueltas especialmente a un pensamiento.

—Date cuenta, Mirah —dijo en una ocasión, tras un largo silencio—, el *Shemá*[295], en el que brevemente confesamos la Unidad divina, es la principal oración del hebreo; y esto convierte nuestra religión en la religión fundamental para el mundo; pues la Unidad divina abraza como consecuencia la unidad final de la humanidad. Mira, por tanto, la nación que ha sido objeto de escarnio por su separación ha dado una teoría unificadora para la raza humana. En la unidad completa, una parte posee la totalidad de la misma forma que la totalidad posee cada parte: y de este modo, la vida humana tiende hacia la imagen de la Suprema Unidad: pues a medida que nuestra vida se vuelve más espiritual por la capacidad del pensamiento, y la alegría que se desprende de él, la posesión tiende a ser más universal, al ser independiente del contacto con el material bruto; así es que llegará pronto un día en el que el alma de un hombre podrá valorar que el bien que ha habido y que hay, y más aún, que ha de venir es superior a todo lo que pudo poseer en una vida entera en la que tuvo que arrastrarse por los caminos de los sentidos. En estos momentos, hermana mía, conservo el gozo de otro futuro para mí: un futuro que estos ojos no verán, y que mi espíritu podría no reconocer como suyo. Yo lo reconozco ahora, y lo amo, de forma que puedo dejar esta vida bajo su altar y decir: «Arde, arde imperceptiblemente en lo que será, que es mi amor y no yo». ¿Lo entiendes, Mirah?

—Un poco —dijo Mirah, débilmente—, pero mi mente es muy pobre para haberlo sentido alguna vez.

—Y aún así —dijo Mardoqueo, insistiendo—, las mujeres están especialmente preparadas para el amor que siente la posesión en la renuncia, y en este sentido son la imagen perfecta de lo que quiero decir. En alguna parte de los últimos *Midrash*[296], creo, está la historia de una doncella judía que amaba tanto a un rey gentil, que esto fue lo que hizo: entró en la prisión y se cambió las ropas con la mujer que amaba el rey, para poder librar a esa mujer de la muerte muriendo ella en su lugar, y dejar que el rey fuera feliz con el amor que no era para ella. Este es un amor incomparable, que se anula a sí mismo en favor del objeto amado.

—No, Esdras, no —dijo Mirah, con baja intensidad—, no fue así. Ella quería que cuando estuviese muerta el rey supiese lo que había hecho, y sentir así que era mejor que la otra. Fue su fuerte personalidad, deseosa de vencer, la que le hizo morir.

Mardoqueo permaneció un momento en silenció, y luego argumentó:

—Podría ser, Mirah. Pero ¿y si actuó de la otra manera, creyendo que el rey nunca lo sabría?

—Puedes rehacer la historia así en tu mente, Esdras, porque tú eres grande, y te gusta imaginar las cosas tan grandes como puedan ser. Pero yo no creo que fuera así. La chica judía debía tener celos en su corazón, y quería asegurarse de alguna manera ocupar el primer lugar en la mente del rey. Por eso es por lo que murió.

—Hermana, has leído demasiadas obras de teatro, en las que los autores se complacen en mostrar las pasiones humanas como demonios internos, separados de los bálsamos y los elementos devotos del alma. Juzgas por esas obras, y no por tu propio corazón, que es como el de tu madre.

Mirah no contestó.

Capítulo 62

> Das Gluck ist eine leichte Dirne,
> und weilt nicht gern am selben Ort;
> Sie streicht das Haar dir von der Stirne
> Und küsst dich rasch und flattert fort.
>
> Frau Ungluck hat im Gegentheile
> Dich liebefest an's Herz gedrückt;
> sie sagt, sie habe keine Eile,
> Setzt sich zu dir ans Bett und strickt.
>
> HEINE[297]

EL PRESAGIO QUE MIRAH HABÍA TENIDO ÚLTIMAMENTE DE QUE LE SOBREVINIERA alguna desgracia, parecía ahora cumplirse en la visita de ese dolor conocido que había vuelto con las maletas repletas.

Al salir de Knightsbridge, tras cantar una mañana en un concierto de caridad en una casa próspera, en la que había sido recomendada por Klemser, y en la que se habían formado los grupos habituales en el exterior cuando la gente salía, empezó a notar que le seguían unos pasos que iban al mismo ritmo que los suyos. Su vestido, que era simplemente negro, y sobre el que se había puesto un abrigo, no podía hacerle llamar mucho la atención, o hacer que fuera una imprudencia pasear por allí; pero Mirah no pensaba en eso; otro tipo de alarma rondaba su mente. Inmediatamente pensó en su padre, y tenía más miedo a darse la vuelta que si le hubiera seguido un fantasma. Volverse y encararle sería encontrarse voluntariamente con el torrente de emociones que de antemano parecía insoportable. Si fuera su padre, le obligaría a darle la cara y a que le reconociera. Era de esperar un arrebato de ese tipo. Continuó caminando, sin acelerar el paso —¿de qué serviría?— pero imaginándose qué iba a suceder como si tuviera la plena certeza de que el hombre que había detrás de ella fuera su padre; y mientras imaginaba esas cosas le vino a la memoria el dolor de haber dado su palabra a la señora Meyrick de no ocultarse de su padre. El dolor le impulsó, al final, intentar evitar cualquier traición que le causara un *shock* innecesario a su hermano. Presionada por esta razón, decidió volverse antes de alcanzar su portal, y afrontar con determinación el encuentro, en vez de dejarse someter por él. Había alcanzado ya la entrada a la pequeña plaza donde estaba su casa, y había decidido

volverse, cuando notó su presentimiento encarnado más cerca de ella, deslizándose a su lado, cogiéndola por la muñeca, y diciendo con acento persuasivo:

—¡Mirah!

Se detuvo al acto sin asustarse; era la voz que esperaba, y se encontró con los ojos esperados. Su rostro estaba tan serio como si hubiera estado contemplando al de su ejecutor, mientras que el de él se adaptaba a la intención de ablandarla y adularla. Antaño había sido un semblante hermoso, de color brillante, y ahora era pálido y arrugado, con esa marca peculiar de la suavidad desvergonzada que proviene de buscar favores a través de la adulación de una forma descarada. Tenía el cuerpo ligero y activo, y conservaba algo de juventud, como si el paso de los años le hubiera solo disfrazado; y en realidad tenía casi cincuenta y siete años. Su vestido estaba raído, como cuando le vio por última vez. La presencia de este padre irreverente afectó a Mirha, ahora, más que nunca, con la angustia entremezclada de la vergüenza y la pena, la repulsa y la piedad —más que nunca, ahora que su mundo había cambiado a uno en el que no había compañeros que lo defendieran del desprecio y del desdén—.

Lentamente, con voz triste y temblorosa, dijo:

—Eres tú, padre.

—¿Por qué huiste de mí, hija? —empezó a hablar rápidamente en lo que pretendía ser un tono de tierno arrepentimiento, acompañado con varios gestos ligeros como si hablara también por signos—. ¿De qué tenías miedo? Sabías que nunca te hice hacer nada que no quisieras. Fue por ti que rompí el contrato en el Vorstadt, porque veía que no era apropiado para ti, y me pagaste dejándome tirado afrontando solo los malos tiempos que vinieron como consecuencia. Había conseguido un contrato más sencillo para ti en el Teatro Vorstadt de Dresden: no te lo dije, porque quería que fuera una sorpresa para ti. Y me dejaste plantado allí, obligándome a pasar penurias porque tuve que rescindir el contrato. Así es como me trataste después de que lo diera todo por que tuvieras una educación que te aportaría una fortuna en el futuro. ¿Qué padre se ha dedicado con más fervor a su hija que lo que lo he hecho yo? Sabes cómo me preocupaba tu problema en la voz, y procuré hacer lo mejor para solucionarlo; y cuando ya no contaba con nadie más que contigo, cuando estaba sufriendo las consecuencias propias de un hombre que ha tenido que luchar con todas sus fuerzas para abrirse camino en la vida, decides escoger esa época para abandonarme. ¿A quién más debías algo sino a mí? ¿Dónde

estaban tus sentimientos de agradecimiento? Pues por lo que a mi hija le importaba, yo habría muerto en una cuneta.

Lapidoth se detuvo aquí, no por falta de inventiva, sino porque había alcanzado un clima cargado de patetismo, y dejó escapar un sollozo repentino, como el de una mujer, sacando enseguida un viejo pañuelo de seda amarillo. Realmente sentía que su hija le había tratado mal: una especie de sensibilidad que es naturalmente fuerte en las personas sin escrúpulos, que solo señalan lo que se les debe a ellos, sin tener en cuenta para nada el punto de vista del otro. Mirah, a pesar de ese sollozo, tenía la suficiente energía para no dejarle suponer que la estaba engañando. Contestó con más firmeza, aunque era la primera vez que usó palabras acusadoras contra él:

—Sabes por qué te dejé, padre; y tenía motivos para desconfiar de ti, porque estaba segura que habías engañado a mi madre. Si hubiera podido confiar en ti, me habría quedado contigo y habría trabajado para ti.

—Nunca pretendí engañar a tu madre, Mirah —dijo Lapidoth, guardando su pañuelo, pero empezando con una voz que parecía luchar contra sus sollozos—. Quería llevarte de vuelta con ella, pero las circunstancias de esa época me lo impidieron, y luego me enteré de que había muerto. Era mejor para ti que me quedara donde estaba, y tu hermano podía cuidar de sí mismo. Nadie salvo tú tenía ningún derecho sobre mí. Me llegaron las noticias de la muerte de tu madre a través de un amigo particular, que se encargó de arreglar las cosas en mi lugar, y le envié dinero para sufragar los gastos. Claro que hay una posibilidad… —Lapidoth había pensado rápidamente que debía asegurarse contra lo improbable, pero posible—, puede haberme escrito mentiras para sacarme el dinero.

Mirah no contestó; no soportaba tener que pronunciar la única verdad: «No creo una palabra de lo que me dices», y simplemente mostró su deseo de que pasearan un poco, pues creía que podían dar una mala impresión si permanecían así quietos mucho tiempo. Incluso caminando, su compañía podía hacer volverse a un transeúnte para observarlos. La figura de Mirah, realzada su belleza por la forma cuidada de su vestir, propia de una dama inglesa, contrastaba grandemente con la de este hombre desharrapado, de mirada ida, ansioso, y que no dejaba de gesticular, y que además, tenía un aspecto difícil de olvidar, tal vez debido a los rizos de su tupido pelo gris, la pequeñez de sus manos y sus pies, y su paso ligero.

—Parece que a ti te ha ido bien, Mirah. No te falta de nada, por lo que veo —dijo el padre, observándola atentamente.

—Unos buenos amigos que me encontraron en una situación desgraciada me ayudaron a conseguir un trabajo —dijo Mirah, sin ser muy consciente de lo que decía, pues estaba más preocupada por lo que tendría que seguir contando—. Doy clases de canto. He cantado en casas privadas. Acabo de cantar en un concierto privado. —Hizo una pausa, y luego añadió, dando a entender su importancia—: Tengo muy buenos amigos, que lo saben todo de mí.

—¿Y te avergonzarías de que vieran a tu padre en este aprieto? No es de extrañar. Vine a Inglaterra sin ninguna perspectiva, sino con la posibilidad de encontrarte. Era una búsqueda loca; pero el corazón de un padre es supersticioso: siente como un imán que le arrastra hacia un lugar u otro. Me habría ido muy bien si me hubiera quedado en el extranjero: no teniendo que cuidar de ti, podría haberme quedado en un sitio o haber mudado como si fuera una pelota; pero es duro estar solo en el mundo, cuando tu fuerza comienza a menguar. Y pensé que mi pequeña Mirah se arrepentiría de haber abandonado a su padre cuando mirase hacia atrás. Se me han torcido mucho las cosas para poder llegar aquí; no sé que es lo siguiente que tendré que hacer. Talentos como el mío no se valoran en este país. Cuando un hombre sale a buscar trabajo con los codos al descubierto nadie cree en él. No he podido conseguir un empleo decente con mi aspecto. Me he visto obligado a caer muy bajo para conseguir un chelín. —La ansiedad de Mirah iba creciendo hasta imaginarse a su padre hundiéndose en la degradación, cosa que se veía obligada a impedir si podía. Pero antes de que pudiera contestar a esa sarta de mentiras, pronunciadas con tanta labia que parecían aprendidas de memoria, añadió enseguida:

—¿Dónde vives, Mirah?

—Aquí, en esta plaza. No estamos lejos de la casa.

—¿De alquiler?

—Sí.

—¿Tienes a alguien que cuide de ti?

—Sí —dijo Mirah de nuevo, mirando cara a cara al rostro que se había vuelto hacia el suyo—: mi hermano.

Los ojos del padre parpadearon como si una centella hubiera entrado en ellos, y sus hombros se encogieron sin querer. Pero tras una pausa perceptible, dijo:

—¿Esdras? ¿Cómo lo conociste? ¿Cómo lo encontraste?

—Sería muy largo de contar. Estamos aquí en la puerta. Mi hermano no querría que te dejara fuera.

Mirah estaba ya en el rellano, pero con el rostro vuelto hacia su padre, que permanecía un poco más abajo en el pavimento. El corazón de ella había comenzado a latir más rápidamente ante la perspectiva de lo que había de suceder en presencia de Esdras; y en esta actitud de conceder permiso al padre al que estaba acostumbrada a obedecer, viéndole de pie debajo de ella, con claro temor a aceptar la admisión que indirectamente había pedido, sintió agudamente esa humillación y vergüenza, peculiar y compasiva, la reverencia de un corazón traspasado, que pertenece a una naturaleza intensamente filial.

—Quédate un minuto, *Liebchen*[298] —dijo Lapidoth, hablando en voz baja—; ¿en qué tipo de hombre se ha convertido Esdras?

—Un buen hombre, un hombre maravilloso —dijo Mirah, con lento énfasis, intentando controlar la agitación que hacía temblar cada vez más su voz mientras continuaba. Se sentía obligada a preparar a su padre para el examen exhaustivo de sí mismo que le aguardaba—. Pero era muy pobre cuando mis amigos lo encontraron por mí; un pobre trabajador. Hubo una vez, hace doce años, en que era fuerte y feliz, y se dirigía hacia el este; le gustaba mucho pensar en el este; mi madre le llamó para que volviera porque… porque me había perdido. Y fue con ella, y la cuidó a pesar de muchas dificultades, y trabajó para ella hasta que murió… murió llena de pena. Y Esdras también perdió su salud y su fuerza. Una neumonía se apoderó de él mientras iba de camino a ver a mi madre, porque estaba abandonada. Durante años se ha ido debilitando, siempre ha sido pobre, siempre estaba trabajando, pero tenía gran cantidad de conocimientos, y era muy inteligente. Todos los que se acercan a él le honran. Estar en su presencia es como estar en presencia de un profeta de Dios. —Mirah terminó con dificultad, con el corazón palpitando—. A él no se le puede ir con falsedades.

Había bajado los ojos para no encontrarse con los de su padre mientras decía las últimas palabras, incapaz de soportar la mirada innoble de frustración que reunía su semblante. Aún así, era muy rápido en la inventiva y en las decisiones.

—Mirah, *Liebchen* —dijo en su anterior estilo adulador—, ¿no te gustaría que pudiera presentarme con un aspecto más respetable ante mi hijo? Si tuviera una pequeña cantidad de dinero, podría arreglarme y venir a tu casa como se merece tu padre, y además podría ofrecerme para trabajar en algún sitio decente. Con una buena camisa y un abrigo, la gente estaría contenta de

que trabajara para ellos. Podría ofrecerme como mensajero si no pareciera un charlatán destartalado. Me gustaría estar con mis hijos, olvidar y perdonar. Pero nunca habías visto a tu padre antes así. Si tuvieras diez libras a mano (o pudiera quedar contigo para que me las trajeras a algún sitio) podría presentarme decentemente pasado mañana.

Mirah se sintió ante una tentación que tenía que vencer. Respondió, obligándose a mirarle a la cara otra vez:

—No quiero negarte lo que pides, padre; pero he dado mi palabra de no hacer cosas por ti en secreto. Es muy duro verte en la necesidad; pero lo soportaremos por un tiempo; y luego podrás tener ropas nuevas, y las podremos pagar nosotros. —Su sentido práctico le hizo ver ahora la sabiduría de la señora Meyrick al obligarle a hacer esa promesa.

El buen humor de Lapidoth fue disminuyendo. Dijo con cierta mofa:

—Eres una joven dama muy estricta; has aprendido virtudes muy útiles, manteniendo promesas para no ayudar a tu padre con una libra o dos cuando estás ganando dinero para vestirte de seda… tu padre que hizo un ídolo de ti, y dejó lo mejor de su vida por proveerte.

—Parece cruel, sé que parece cruel —dijo Mirah, pensando que era este un momento peor que cuando quería ahogarse. Sus labios se quedaron de repente sin color—. Pero, padre, es más cruel romper las promesas en las que confían las personas. Eso partió a mi madre el corazón, y ha roto la vida de Esdras. Tú y yo debemos tragarnos ahora esta amargura por lo que ha pasado. Sopórtalo. Soporta entrar dentro y que te cuidemos por lo que eres.

—Mañana, entonces —dijo Lapidoth, casi girándose sobre sus talones apartándose de esta hija pálida y temblorosa, que parecía tener ahora al mundo de su parte; pero rápidamente se volvió de nuevo, sintiendo sus manos inquietas en los bolsillos, y dijo, volviendo en parte a su tono atractivo—: Estoy hecho trizas con todo esto, Mirah. Mañana estaré más animado. Si tienes algo de dinero en tu bolsillo, supongo que no va en contra de tu promesa que me des un poco, para comprar un cigarro.

Mirah no podía hacerse ya más preguntas, no pudo hacer más que llevarse sus frías y temblorosas manos al bolsillo para sacar su *portemonnaie*. Lapidoth lo agarró fuertemente enseguida, y dijo:

—Adiós, mi pequeña, hasta mañana pues —y la dejó. No había dado muchos pasos antes de examinar atentamente todos los pliegues del bolso, encontró dos medios soberanos y algunas monedas de plata, y un trozo de papel pegado al forro en el que Esdras había escrito, con hermosos caracteres

hebreos, el nombre de su madre, el día de su nacimiento, su matrimonio, su muerte y la oración: «Que Mirah sea librada del mal». A Mirah le gustaba tener esta pequeña inscripción en muchos de los artículos que usaba. El padre la leyó, y tuvo un fugaz recuerdo del día de su boda, y del brillante e inocente chico que era por entonces: enseñaba muchas cosas, pero esperaba con el tiempo conseguir dinero más fácilmente escribiendo; y recordaba que quería de verdad a su novia Sara; lloraba cuando ella esperaba que lo hiciera, y reflejaba cada fase de los sentimientos de ella con una calcada sensibilidad. Lapidoth se había distanciado mucho de ese joven muchacho, y pensó fríamente en todo lo que esta inscripción significaba, lo cual era como si alguien viera que le están tocando, pero ha perdido toda su sensibilidad táctil, o como los bocados en un paladar sin gusto, notando la forma y la rugosidad, pero no el sabor. Lo primero que se arroja por la borda en una vida egoísta y perezosa es la capacidad de mostrar compasión, remordimientos y arrepentimiento sincero —que podemos acabar anhelando como el moribundo anhela sentir sus heridas, en lugar de ser consciente de que cada vez tiene menos conciencia—. El bolso de Mirah era bonito: un regalo que le habían hecho, y que no le había dado tiempo de pensar qué le estaba dando a su padre. Lapidtoh, una vez fuera de su ensueño, se puso a pensar cuánto más podría sacar por el bolso además de lo que contenía dentro, y las perspectivas que tenía de conseguir más cosas de su hija sin tener que someterse y adoptar una actitud de penitencia ante los ojos del hijo irreprochable. Todavía le preocupaba ese asunto.

Mientras tanto, Mirah había entrado en casa superando la crueldad de su dolor gracias a su capacidad de desconfianza. Halló a su hermano leyendo y revisando viejos manuscritos suyos, que pretendía confiar a Deronda. Como reacción al esfuerzo que le había supuesto controlarse tanto, cayó ante él y le cogió por las rodillas, sollozando y llorando:

—¡Esdras, Esdras!

Él no dijo nada. La alarmaba conocer la causa de su aflicción, tanto más extraña por la violencia de su manifestación. Pero Mirah no deseaba otra cosa que desahogarse y contarle la causa. Levantó la mano, y todavía sollozando, dijo con voz entrecortada:

—¡Esdras, mi padre! ¡Nuestro padre! Me siguió. Quería que entrase. Le dije que le dejarías entrar. Y me dijo que no, que no ahora, que mañana. Y me pidió dinero. Y yo le di mi bolso, y se marchó.

A Mirah le pareció que sus palabras expresaban todo su dolor. Su hermano las encontró menos graves que sus ideas preconcebidas, y dijo amablemente:

—Espera a calmarte, Mirah, y luego me lo cuentas todo —sacándole el sombrero y poniéndole con ternura las manos sobre su cabeza. Ella sintió cómo le aliviaba, y en unos pocos minutos le contó tan precisamente como pudo todo lo que había pasado.

—No vendrá mañana —dijo Mardoqueo. Ninguno de los dos dijo al otro lo que ambos pensaban, a saber, que su padre estaría atento a las salidas de Mirah y le pediría más dinero.

—Mira —añadió él entonces—, nuestro destino es el destino de Israel. La pena y la gloria van unidos como el humo y la llama. Es porque nosotros los hijos hemos heredado el bien que sentimos el mal. Estamos ligados a estas cosas, como lo estaba nuestro padre a nuestra madre.

El entorno era de Brompton, pero la voz podría haber provenido de un rabino que transmitiese las sentencias de tiempos inmemoriales que aparecen en el *Babli*, que es el diminutivo como se conoce (para nuestros oídos suena de forma afectuosa) el Talmud de Babilonia[299]. El Omnipresente, dijo un rabino, se ocupa en hacer matrimonios. La ligereza de la frase radica en el oído de quien la escucha; pues por matrimonios, el que la dijo se refería a todas las asombrosas combinaciones del universo cuya formación nos proporciona el bien o el mal.

Capítulo 63

> Moses, trotz seiner Befeindung der Kunst, dennoch selber ein grosser Künstler war und den wahren Künstlergeist besass. Nur war dieser Künstlergeist bei ihm, wie bei seinen ägyptischen Landsleuten, nurauf das Colossale und Unverwüstliche gerichtet. Aber nicht vie die Aegypter formirte er seine Kunstwerke aus Backstein und Granit, sondern er baute Menchenpyramiden, er meisselte Menschen Obelisken, ernahm einen armen Hirtenstamm und Schuf daraus ein Volk, das ebenfalls den Jahrhahunderten, trotzen sollte… er Schuf Israel.
>
> HEINE, *Geständnisse*[300]

IMAGINAD LA DIFERENCIA ENTRE EL ESTADO DE ÁNIMO DE DERONDA CUANDO abandonó Inglaterra y cuando regresó. Había partido a Génova en total incertidumbre respecto a cuánto serían alentados sus deseos y afectos actuales, cuánto le afectarían las afirmaciones que le revelasen y por qué nuevos caminos le conducirían, lejos de las huellas dejadas últimamente por sus pensamientos, consentidos por la incertidumbre y, sin duda, cada vez más peligrosos. Regresó con algo así como el descubrimiento de un privilegio garantizando el derecho heredado que su ambición había empezado a anhelar: regresó con lo que era mejor que la libertad: con un vínculo del que se desprendían unas obligaciones que su experiencia le había preparado para aceptar con alegría, incluso aunque no tuviera la promesa de satisfacer su profundo anhelo secreto que nunca se le permitió que se desarrollara en una esperanza. Pero ahora ya se atrevía a reconocer hacia dónde se dirigía su amor. Desde la hora en que dejó la casa de Chelsea en un silencio pasional bajo el efecto de la mirada y las palabras de despedida de Mirah, su encanto exquisito que revolvía en él ese gusto tan oculto por lo femenino que había empezado cuando sus propios labios eran como los de una niña, la percepción que ella tenía de los sentimientos de él le había ayudado a permanecer intachable tanto en palabras como en obras bajo las difíciles circunstancias que conocemos. No parecía probable que pudiera cortejar nunca a esta criatura que se había vuelto muy querida para él, debido a las asociaciones que impedían cualquier tipo de cortejo; y aún así, había ocupado el puesto de su alma como un ser amado, reduciendo el poder de cualquier otra fascinación, ya que al compararlas se veían enseguida las deficiencias de estas. Esa influencia no había dejado de reforzarse. Las distintas situaciones de la pobre Gwendolen habían provocado que su dependencia de Deronda le

suscitara en él el efecto de la piedad compasiva más que el del amor personal, y su ternura menos refrenada fluía con toda su fuerza hacia una imagen que residía en todas las cosas que no eran como Gwendolen. Y aún más, su relación con Mardoqueo había favorecido un nuevo acercamiento hacia Mirah que no era inquietante en lo más mínimo, puesto que no había ningún cambio aparente en su posición respecto a ella; y ella estaba inevitablemente ligada a todos los pensamientos que le hacían temer que pudiera decepcionar a su hermano. Este proceso no se había dado de forma consciente; tan solo era consciente de la misma manera en que lo somos nosotros de cierta codicia que es mejor que suprimamos alentando otros pensamientos que otorgándole su reconocimiento, aunque sea confesándonoslo solo a nosotros mismos; pero el fuego de los celos se había prendido ante las pretensiones de Hans, y cuando su madre le acusó de enamorarse de una judía cualquier evasiva le parecía ya una infidelidad. Su madre le había obligado a reconocer claramente su amor, así como Joseph Kalonymos le había obligado a reconocer claramente su determinación. Estas decisiones fueron tomadas por Deronda con tal fuerza que él mismo estaba sorprendido. Se produjo una especie de liberación de toda la energía que durante tanto tiempo había estado reprimida a causa de las dudas; y se reía de su propia impetuosidad cuando, al acercarse a Inglaterra de su viaje desde Mainz, sentía cada vez más la distancia que le quedaba como un impedimento. Era como si hubiese encontrado un alma añadida al descubrir su ascendencia; ya no se movía en la gran masa de la compasión imparcial, sino que escogía, con esa parcialidad que es la mejor fuerza del hombre, esa compañía cercana que convierte a la compasión en algo práctico, cambiando la racionalidad de la vista de pájaro que se eleva para evitar la preferencia pero que se pierde así los pequeños detalles, por la generosa racionalidad de arrimarse codo con codo con los hombres que hubieran recibido el mismo legado. Quería estar de nuevo con Mardoqueo, derramar sus sentimientos en lugar de reprimirlos, admitir sus argumentos y aún así mantenerse disconforme, y en definitiva, poder encontrarse ante la presencia de Mirah sin avergonzarse de haberla buscado, verla a la luz de una nueva posibilidad, interpretar sus miradas y sus palabras desde un nuevo punto de vista. No le preocupaba mucho el efecto de las atenciones de Hans, pero tenía el presentimiento de que lo que ella sentía por él se había canalizado desde el primer momento de forma que no era probable que se convirtiera en amor. Dejar sorprendida a una mujer al declarar tu amor cuando ella siempre ha

pensado en ti como en un Lord Canciller es algo que asusta a cualquier hombre: prefiere pasar por una transición más sencilla.

¿Qué hay de extraño que Deronda no siguiera otro camino que el de dirigirse directamente desde la estación de ferrocarriles de Londres al alojamiento de la pequeña plaza de Brompton? Todas las razones coincidían en su favor de no perder tiempo. Había prometido bajar a ver al día siguiente a Lady Mallinger a la Abadía, y ya casi se estaba poniendo el sol. Deseaba dejar el preciado cofre a Mardoqueo, que estudiaría su contenido, tanto en su compañía como en su ausencia; y que realizara esta visita sin pasar antes por ningún otro sitio satisfaría enormemente el corazón de Mardoqueo. Así que, por otras razones, satisfizo también el de Deronda. Las tendencias más fuertes de su naturaleza se precipitaban por una corriente: el afecto ferviente que le hacía estar encantado al poder ayudar a los seres cercanos a él, y la necesidad imaginativa de una relación difícil de conseguir como horizonte para sus actos diarios e inmediatos. Hay que admitir que en su posición clásica, romántica e histórica, con su armadura heredada desde lugares remotos, llevaba —aunque también es de suponer que lo hacían los héroes antiguos, fuesen semíticos o jaféticos[301]— los trajes de sus contemporáneos. Al entrar en la casa, preguntándose con qué iba a encontrarse, no se dio cuenta de que estaba enrojeciendo, pues raramente pensaba en esas cosas; pero a medida que iba ganando color, sus ojos mostraban un brillo añadido, y su piel reflejaba la luz de una forma especial. Entró de la forma más silenciosa posible.

Era la noche de la misma tarde en la que Mirah se había encontrado con su padre. Mardoqueo, carcomido por la pena, así como por los tristes recuerdos que había despertado el incidente, no había acabado su tarea de clasificar papeles: algunos de ellos habían caído esparcidos por el suelo en los primeros momentos de ansiedad, y ni él ni Mirah pensaron en volver a ordenarlos. Habían permanecido sentados quietos juntos, sin saber por cuánto tiempo; mientras el reloj de la chimenea avanzaba lentamente, y la luz del exterior iba menguando, Mirah, incapaz de pensar en la comida que debería haber cogido, no se había movido desde que se sacó su abrigo, y se sentó al lado de Mardoqueo con su mano en la de él, mientras él había inclinado la cabeza hacia atrás, con los ojos cerrados y respirando con dificultad, como si su alma, pensó Mirah, no pudiera vivir en esa casa tan estrecha. Siempre acababa pensando que su muerte estaba cerca cuando veía su rostro con esa expresión, sin su vívida animación; y ahora, al resto de aflicciones, había que añadir la de que había sido incapaz de controlar el violento arrebato que le

había producido a su hermano. Estaba sentada observándolo, sus mejillas ovaladas pálidas, sus ojos con el triste brillo dejado por lágrimas jóvenes, sus rizos en desorden como los de un niño recién levantado observando su rostro atenuado, sobre el que era fácil imaginarse un velo que nunca más sería levantado, como si fuera su alegría muerta la que le hubiera dejado la suficiente fuerza como para vivir con pena. Y la vida en esos momentos se dilataba ante Mirah con algo más que la mera repetición de su anterior tristeza. La sombra del padre estaba allí, y más que eso, un doble desamparo, uno que hacía referencia a los vivos y otro a los muertos.

Pero entonces se abrió la puerta, y aunque no entró nadie, se oyó una voz bien familiar:

—¿Daniel Deronda puede entrar aquí?

—¡Entra! ¡Entra! —dijo Mardoqueo, levantándose inmediatamente con el rostro radiante y los ojos como platos, aparentemente tan poco sorprendido como si hubiera visto a Deronda por la mañana, y esperara esta visita nocturna; Mirah se sobresaltó enrojeciendo con confusión, un poco a la expectativa.

Pero ver entrar a Deronda fue como la claridad tras la lluvia: las nubes que estaban por venir no impedían la maravillosa luz de ese momento. Mientras le ofreció la mano derecha a Mirah, que estaba cerca a la izquierda de su hermano, puso su otra mano sobre el hombro derecho de Mardoqueo, y permaneció así por unos momentos, sosteniéndolos a ambos a la vez, sin pronunciar palabra, pero leyendo sus rostros, hasta que dijo con ansiedad a Mirah:

—¿Ha pasado algo? ¿Algún problema?

—No hablemos de problemas ahora —dijo Mardoqueo, librándola de la necesidad de responder—. Hay alegría en tu semblante, compartamos esa alegría.

Mirah pensó: «Es por algo que no puede decirnos». Pero todos se sentaron, Deronda arrastrando una silla cercana enfrente de Mardoqueo.

—Es cierto —dijo él con énfasis—. Tengo una alegría que permanecerá con nosotros incluso ante los peores problemas. No te conté la razón de mi viaje en el extranjero, Mardoqueo, porque quería conocer mi parentesco. Y tenías razón. Soy judío.

Los dos hombres entrelazaron sus manos con un movimiento que pareció parte del destello de los ojos de Mardoqueo, y Mirah lo percibió como una

descarga eléctrica. Pero Deronda prosiguió, hablando según el parecer de Mardoqueo, que era también el suyo:

—Tenemos el mismo pueblo. Nuestras almas tienen la misma vocación. Ni la vida ni la muerte nos separará.

Mardoqueo pronunció su respuesta en hebreo, en un pequeño susurro. Eran las palabras litúrgicas que expresan el vínculo religioso:

—Nuestro Dios y el Dios de nuestros padres.

El peso de los sentimientos que recaían sobre esas palabras era muy fuerte, las cuales normalmente las utilizaba en momentos de gran fervor.

Mirah se arrodilló al lado de su hermano, y observó su rostro ahora iluminado, que momentos antes parecía tan moribundo. Era una reacción inevitable del brusco cambio que se produjo del desaliento a una alegría que le sobrevino de forma tan solemne como si hubiera estado contemplando un rito religioso. Por el momento, pensaba en el efecto que tenía esa noticia sobre su propia vida a través del efecto que tenía sobre la de su hermano.

—Y no solo es que sea judío —prosiguió Deronda, disfrutando de uno de esos raros momentos en que nuestros anhelos y nuestros actos se funden en uno solo, y la realidad que contemplamos es nuestra aspiración ideal—, sino que provengo del esfuerzo que ha mantenido ardientemente la comunión de nuestra raza, una línea de judíos españoles que ha dado al mundo muchos estudiosos y hombres de poder. Y yo poseo lo que nos dará una especie de comunión con ellos. Mi abuelo, Daniel Charisi, conservó unos manuscritos, recuerdos familiares muy lejanos, con la esperanza de que pasasen a su nieto. Y ahora su esperanza se ha realizado, a pesar de los intentos de otros de frustrarla ocultándome mi parentesco. Poseo el cofre que los contiene, con sus propios papeles, y está abajo en esta casa. Quiero dejarlos contigo, Mardoqueo, para que me ayudes a estudiar los manuscritos. Algunos los puedo leer con facilidad, los que están en español y en italiano. Otros están en hebreo y, creo, en árabe; pero parecen ser traducciones latinas. Solo pude mirarlos por encima mientas estaba en Mainz. Los estudiaremos juntos.

Deronda concluyó con esa brillante sonrisa que, proviniendo de la seriedad habitual de su rostro, parecía una revelación (lo contrario de esas sonrisas permanentes que desacreditan cualquier expresión). Pero cuando esta mirada de felicidad pasó de Mardoqueo a descansar en Mirah, actuó como un haz de luz que le hizo cambiar a ella de actitud. Se había arrodillado bajo un impulso y era incongruente sentir cualquier azoramiento personal, especialmente pensar cómo se tomaría la señora Grandcourt este nuevo estado

de las cosas, pero estos pensamientos la hicieron enrojecer ante la mirada de Deronda, y se levantó para tomar asiento de nuevo en su postura habitual de manos y pies cruzados, esforzándose en aparecer tan tranquila como pudo. Deronda, igualmente sensible, se imaginaba que sus ojos revelaban el sentimiento del cual era tan consciente, y que a ella le habría resultado repugnante. Estaba dispuesto a creer que cualquier manifestación inesperada arruinaría sus sentimientos hacia él y, en consecuencia, la preciada relación que tenía con los dos hermanos. Si Mirah no le amaba, cualquier signo de amor por su parte la haría desgraciada al seguir el continuo contacto que era inevitable.

Mientras tales sentimientos palpitaban con fuerza en Deronda y Mirah, Mardoqueo, no viendo más que una plena bendición en la presencia y las palabras de su amigo, hablaba como solía hacer con grandes rodeos:

—Daniel, desde el principio, te dije que no conocíamos todos los caminos. ¿No han confluido todos al mismo punto, como las acciones que se operan en un alma, que cuando nace una idea, todos los elementos confluyen en ella, alimentándose e iluminándose? Pues todas las cosas están unidas en esa Omnipresencia que es lugar donde habita el mundo, y los acontecimientos son como un cristal por el que nuestros ojos ven algunos de los caminos. Y si parece que las voluntades descarriadas y egoístas de los hombres te han ayudado a prepararte, como prepararon a Moisés, para que sirvas mejor a tu pueblo, eso depende de otro orden que la ley que debe guiar nuestros pasos. Pues la mala voluntad del hombre no hace bien a un pueblo salvo que promueve a obrar bien a otros hombres; y por muy confusos que se muestren nuestros pensamientos ante el Eterno, una cosa está clara: que un pueblo solo será bendecido si tiene consejeros y una multitud cuya voluntad vaya en acuerdo con las leyes de la justicia y del amor. De hecho, fue tu capacidad de amar lo que te llevó a ese viaje, y resististe el efecto del mal; así que al cumplir con los deberes de fraternidad hacia mi hermana, y ayudarla a buscar a su hermano, tu alma se ha preparado para recibir con alegría este mensaje de lo Eterno: «observa la multitud de tus hermanos».

—Hay que reconocer que tú y Mirah habéis sido mis maestros —dijo Deronda—. Si se me hubiera hecho esta revelación antes de conoceros a los dos, creo que me habría rebelado contra ella. Tal vez habría pensado entonces: «Si pudiera haberlo escogido, no habría sido judío». Lo que siento ahora es que todo mi ser consiente ante tal hecho. Pero ha sido el acuerdo

gradual alcanzado entre tu mentalidad y la mía la que me ha llevado a este pleno consentimiento.

Mientras Deronda hablaba, tenía muy presente en su recuerdo la primera noche en la librería, con todo el retraimiento que le produjo entonces la seguridad profética de Mardoqueo. Formaba parte de su naturaleza disfrutar satisfaciendo al máximo a esa alma ansiosa y expectante, que parecía complacida ante el rostro que contemplaba, como el observador que al cabo de mucho tiempo ve al final la señal de humo en la montaña, y prosiguió con más fervor:

—Es a través de tu inspiración que me he dado cuenta de lo que puede ser la tarea de mi vida. Eres tú el que le ha dado forma a lo que, creo, era un anhelo heredado, el efecto de los pensamientos pasionales y ensimismados de muchos antepasados, pensamientos que parecen haber estado presentes de forma muy intensa en mi abuelo. Imagínate que raptáramos al hijo de una tribu de alguna montaña y lo lleváramos a una ciudad de la llanura, o que alguien con un genio innato para la pintura naciera ciego; la vida de sus antepasados afloraría en ellos de forma confusa, anhelando objetos y sensaciones desconocidas, y los hechizados hábitos de conducta heredados serían como un instrumento musical sabiamente diseñado que nunca haya sido tocado, pero dando a entender por los misteriosos significados de su intrincada estructura que, ante las manos adecuadas, daría una música excelente. Algo así, pienso, ha ocurrido conmigo. Desde que aprendí a leer y a escribir, siempre deseé llevar a cabo una tarea ideal, en la que pudiera sentirme el corazón y el cerebro de una multitud, algún tipo de liderazgo social, que me llegaría como un deber, y que no lo ambicionaría como un premio personal. Tú me ayudaste a comprender la imagen de esa tarea: unir a nuestra raza a pesar de las herejías. Tú me dijiste: «Nuestra religión nos unió antes de que nos dividiera, nos hizo un pueblo antes de hacernos rabinos y caraítas»[302]. Tengo la intención de hacer todo lo posible para conseguir esa unión, quiero trabajar con tu espíritu. El fracaso no será innoble, pero sería deshonroso que no lo intentara.

—Eres como un hermano que se alimentó de los mismos pechos de mi madre —dijo Mardoqueo, dejándose caer en la silla con una mirada de reposo exultante, como si hubiera dado por finalizada su labor.

Para valorar el efecto de esta efusión ardiente por parte de Deronda, debemos recordar su reserva anterior, cómo evitaba cuidadosamente el asentimiento precipitado o el aliento engañoso, que daba a este decidido

compromiso de sí mismo una solemnidad sacramental, tanto para él como para Mardoqueo. El efecto sobre Mirah era igualmente fuerte, aunque con una diferencia: sentía una sorpresa que no sucedía con su hermano, por la repentina revelación de cercanía de Deronda hacia ellos: le pareció que el día se abría ante ella y que aún podían ocurrir otras cosas diferentes a las que había presentido en las tinieblas. Pero tras un momento de silencio Mardoqueo reemprendió la conversación:

—Ya ha comenzado, la unión de nuestras almas. Solo queda desprenderse de este cuerpo, y entonces los que estamos desposados nos uniremos en un vínculo perfecto, y lo que es mío será tuyo. No me atribuyas a mí nada de lo que he escrito, Daniel; pues aunque nuestros maestros nos enseñaron que hay que citar las cosas diciendo quién las ha dicho (y su regla es buena), sin embargo, no excluye la anhelada unión que funde las almas entre sí, colmando el pensamiento y purificándolas, de forma que la plenitud es inseparable y la claridad es inseparable. Pues he juzgado lo que he escrito, y es mi deseo que el cuerpo que he dado a mi pensamiento se olvide como se hará con este cuerpo carnal; dejemos que el pensamiento nazca de nuevo desde nuestra alma unida que será llamada tuya.

—No debes pedirme que te prometa eso —dijo Deronda, sonriendo—. Primero tengo que estar convencido de que hay razones para ello en los mismos escritos. Y yo todavía soy un pupilo. Esa fusión se producirá aunque no queramos; pero que haya cosas que no podamos impedir no quiere decir que hagamos de eso una regla para no elegir nada. Creo que nuestro deber ha de ser fiel a la tradición en las cosas que podamos alcanzar. Por eso, no debes negarte a ti mismo. No me pidas que niegue mi parentesco espiritual, cuando he encontrado la clave de mi vida en el reconocimiento del parentesco natural.

—No te pediré nada hasta que veas la razón —dijo Mardoqueo—. Estás en lo cierto: estaría obedeciendo otra norma en lugar de la del Maestro. Pero durante años, mi esperanza, o aún más, mi confianza, ha sido no que la imagen imperfecta de mi pensamiento (que es una mala aproximación del joven tallador que ha visto un modelo celeste y tiembla al imitar la visión), no que esta imagen perdure, sino que esta visión y su pasión entren en ti; sí, en ti, pues la persona que estuve anhelando durante años, ¿no eras tú, al que enseguida te reconocí cuando viniste? No obstante, serás tú el que juzgue. Pues mi alma está satisfecha. —Mardoqueo hizo una pausa, y luego continuó en otro tono, volviendo a las sugerencias anteriores que había expuesto Deronda—: ¿Qué es lo que movió a tus padres a…? —pero inmediatamente

se retrajo, y añadió—: No, no te pediré que me cuentes nada que concierna a otros, a menos que tú quieras.

—Poco a poco, llegará un momento en que lo sepas todo —dijo Deronda —. Pero ahora contadme algo de vosotros, y qué ha ocurrido mientras he estado fuera. Estoy seguro de que habéis tenido algún problema. Mirah ha estado preocupada por algo.

Miró a Mirah, pero ella inmediatamente se volvió hacia su hermano, en un gesto que expresaba su deseo de que fuera él quien diera la difícil respuesta. Esperaba que él no creyera necesario contar a Deronda los hechos sobre su padre en una noche tal como esta. Justo ahora que Deronda se había acercado tanto a ellos, y se había identificado con su hermano, le dolía que tuviera que oír esta desgracia que se cernía sobre ellos, que parecía haberse vuelto también parte suya. Para calmarse se levantó y cogió su sombrero y su abrigo, pensando que sería mejor retirarse a su habitación: tal vez hablasen más cómodos si les dejase. Pero mientras tanto, Mardoqueo dijo:

—Hoy hemos tenido un disgusto. Hay un deber que parecía haberse perdido en la distancia, pero ha regresado y nos ha hecho frente, trayendo consigo no una alegría, sino un temor al que debemos someternos. Pero por el momento no soportamos ningún yugo visible. Hablemos de esto más tarde como si esta noche, en la que profundizamos sobre nosotros, fuera el principio del festival en el que debemos ofrecer los primeros frutos de nuestra alegría, y no mezclemos la tristeza con ellos.

Deronda adivinaba la pena escondida, y dejó el tema, levantándose cuando vio que Mirah se levantaba, y diciéndole:

—¿Se va? Yo tengo que irme también inmediatamente, cuando la señora Adam y yo hayamos subido el preciado cofre, y le haya entregado la llave a Mardoqueo… no, Esdras. ¿Puedo llamarle Esdras ahora? Me he acostumbrado a pensar en él como Esdras desde que le oí a usted llamarle así.

—Por favor, llámelo Esdras —dijo Mirah, débilmente, sintiendo una nueva timidez bajo la mirada de Deronda y su presencia cercana. ¿Había realmente algo diferente en él, o estaba la diferencia solo en sus sentimientos? Las extrañas y diversas emociones de las últimas horas la habían dejado exhausta; estaba agotada por la fatiga y la falta de alimento. Deronda, observando su palidez y su nerviosismo, deseaba mostrar más sus sentimientos, pero no se atrevía. Ella le estrechó la mano haciendo un esfuerzo por sonreír, y él se ofreció a abrirle la puerta. Eso fue todo.

A un hombre de buenas maneras le repulsa cortejar a una mujer cuya riqueza o rango superior podrían parecerle presuntuosos o con motivos interesados; pero Deronda se encontraba con una dificultad mayor en su posición, que vista superficialmente, era justo lo contrario de la otra —aunque para un amor ardiente y reverencial, la mujer amada tiene siempre un tipo de riqueza y de rango que hace que el hombre recele del aspecto de sus declaraciones hacia ella—. La dificultad de Deronda era la que habría sentido en cierto grado cualquier hombre generoso; pero a él le afectaba de forma peculiar por su forma de mostrar su compasión y el fuerte sentimiento de gratitud de ella. Sabía que Mirah se sentía obligada hacia él, lo que por su sensibilidad podría hacer que cada deseo de él tuviera el aspecto de una petición; y si ella no fuera capaz de realizarla le causaría una pena continuamente recordada por su inevitable comunión con el cuidado de Esdras. Estaban en juego no solo temores de orgullo, sino sobre todo de extrema ternura. Además, Deronda consideraba con ansiedad que asumir el papel de benefactor sería un obstáculo insuperable para confesarle su amor, a menos que por una forma inconcebible se le pudiera revelar que el corazón de Mirah le había aceptado de antemano. Así que su propia agitación no era, tampoco, pequeña.

Incluso un hombre que se haya ejercitado en la seducción hasta que su propia insinceridad le ha hecho escéptico, puede al final ser sorprendido por la admiración hacia una amante, puede temblar, tartamudear, y no mostrar más signos de la recuperación de su sensibilidad que los típicos pinchazos que sentimos cuando se nos duerme un miembro: ¡cuánto más puede poseer la enérgica timidez a un hombre cuya historia personal ha reavivado sus sensibilidades en vez de adormecerlas, manteniendo fresco y arraigado el lenguaje de la pasión como un hermoso follaje de una ladera en primavera!

En cuanto a Mirah, apoyaba esa noche su preciosa cabeza sobre la almohada dando vueltas a sus sospechas anteriores, con otra forma, pero aún presentes, como una historia horrible que hubiera sido desacreditada pero no disipada. Todo lo que sabía con seguridad sobre Deronda parecía probar que no tenía las ataduras que ella había creído. Todo su aspecto, así como sus palabras, daban por supuesto que no existían lazos ocultos que tuvieran algún efecto decisivo sobre su futuro. Pero a pesar de esta sencilla y razonable inferencia, el corazón de Mirah todavía mostraba desasosiego. Deronda no tenía la culpa, pero era tan importante para la señora Grandcourt que algo debía afectarle a él. Y el pensamiento de una estrecha confianza entre ellos

reavivó la pequeña serpiente venenosa que por largo tiempo había permanecido enrollada y tranquila en el dulce pecho de Mirah.

¿Pero sentía esta noche con la misma certeza de antes que sus celos por tener ella alguna posibilidad no eran ya tan descabellados como los serían si su alma humana se hubiera encarnado en el cuerpo de un cervatillo al que Deronda hubiera librado de los arqueros? A duras penas. Algo indefinido había ocurrido, algo que marcaba una diferencia. La suave y cálida lluvia de flores que había caído precisamente donde ella estaba, ¿vino en realidad porque ella estaba allí? ¿Qué espíritu había entre las ramas?

Capítulo 64

> Questa montagna è tale,
> che sempre al cominciar di sotto è grave,
> e quanto uom piú va su e men fa male.
>
> DANTE, *Il purgatorio*[303]

NO HABÍAN PASADO MUCHOS DÍAS DESPUÉS DE LA LLEGADA DE SU MADRE CUANDO Gwendolen consintió en quedarse en Génova. Su deseo de escapar de esa gema del mar la ayudó a recuperar su fuerza y su coraje. ¿Pues en qué lugar, aunque fuera el florido valle de Enna, su sensación interior no lo convertiría en un territorio de castigo en el que las flores no fueran más que llamas que quemasen las plantas de los pies?

—No quiero ver el Mediterráneo nunca más —dijo Gwendolen a su madre, la cual pensaba que entendía bastante bien los sentimientos de su niña, incluso en su tácita prohibición de cualquier referencia expresa a su difunto marido.

La señora Davilow, ciertamente, a pesar de estar obligada a considerar formalmente este tiempo como uno de severa calamidad, estaba prácticamente disfrutando su vida más de lo que lo había hecho desde que se casó su hija. Creía que su querida hija no solo volvía a ella con su antiguo afecto, sino además con una consciente estimación de la cercanía de su madre, como la que damos a una posesión que hemos estado a punto de perder.

—¿Estás ahí, mamá? —gritó Gwendolen, a mitad de la noche (había hecho poner una cama para su madre en su misma habitación), igual que hacía en su tierna infancia cuando le asustaba estar tumbada y despierta.

—Sí, querida, ¿pudo hacer algo por ti?

—No, gracias; solo quiero saber que estás ahí. ¿Te importa que te despierte? —(Esta pregunta no la habría formulado seguramente en su tierna infancia).

—No estaba dormida, cariño.

—No me parecía real que estuvieses aquí conmigo. Quería hacerlo real. Puedo soportar las cosas si tú estás conmigo. Pero no debes permanecer

despierta, preocupada por mí. Tienes que ser feliz ahora. Tienes que dejarme hacerte feliz por fin; si no, ¿qué es lo que haré yo?

—Dios te bendiga, querida; tengo la mayor felicidad que se pueda tener, cuando me valoras tanto.

Pero a la noche siguiente, al oír que estaba suspirando inquieta, la señora Davilow dijo:

—Deja que te haga tu infusión para dormir, Gwendolen.

—No, mamá, gracias; no quiero dormir.

—Te haría tanto bien dormir un poco más, querida.

—No me digas lo que me haría bien, mamá —respondió Gwendolen, con ímpetu—. No sabes qué es lo que me haría bien. Tú y mi tío no debéis contradecirme y decirme que algo es bueno para mí cuando yo veo que no lo es.

La señora Davilow se calló, sin sorprenderse de que la pobre chica estuviera irritada. Al final Gwendolen dijo:

—Siempre fui mala contigo, mamá.

—No, querida, no.

—Sí —insistió Gwendolen—. Es porque antes era más malvada que desgraciada que soy ahora.

Rompió a llorar en sollozos. La determinación de no decir nada sobre los hechos de su vida matrimonial y su desenlace se mostraba en estas enigmáticas reacciones de azoramiento.

Pero la madre entreveía de una forma confusa qué podía pasarle, por la información que Sir Hugo daba al señor Gascoigne, y con ciertas omisiones, que el señor Gascoigne le daba a ella. El bondadoso baronet, mientras atendía todas las medidas necesarias relacionadas con la muerte de su sobrino, y el posible lavado en tierra del cadáver, pensó que lo mejor que podía hacer, aprovechando su relación amistosa con el Rector, era comunicarle, de la forma más suave posible, el contenido del testamento de Grandcourt, para librarle de la sorpresa adicional que le supondría si se hacía ilusiones con los suyos. Tal vez Sir Hugo se lo habría dicho igual si no quisiese ahorrarle esa desilusión, pero sentía que debía hacerlo por eso. Comunicó la desagradable noticia al Rector por partes: al principio solo expuso su temor a que la viuda no hubiese sido tan espléndidamente provista como el señor Gascoigne, o más aún, como el mismo baronet hubiesen esperado; y solo al final, tras algunas referencias previas de forma imprecisa a ciertas obligaciones de Grandcourt, descubrió las relaciones prioritarias que, en el desafortunado caso de la

ausencia de un heredero legítimo, había decidido que todo el esplendor fuera a parar a otra dirección.

El Rector se sintió profundamente dolido, y recordó, con más nitidez de lo que lo había hecho nunca, que la actitud del difunto hacia él había sido ofensivamente orgullosa y repelente —recordó también que él mismo, en ese interesante período que precedió a la llegada del nuevo ocupante de Diplow, había oído indicios de líos anteriores, y de una indebida adicción al placer, pero no había previsto que el placer que había sido, por así decir, barrido en montones de basura privada, se presentaría de nuevo en forma de gusanos vivos, desastrosos para la vida de la gente respetable—. Pero no exteriorizó ante Sir Hugo estos pensamientos, ni se rebajó a sí mismo expresando su indignación por motivos meramente personales, sino que se comportó como un hombre de mundo que se había convertido en un clérigo esmerado. Su primera observación fue:

—Cuando un hombre joven hace su testamento gozando de plena salud, normalmente cuenta con que vivirá mucho tiempo. Probablemente el señor Grandcourt no creía que su presente testamento tuviera jamás efecto. —Tras un momento, añadió—: El efecto es doloroso en más de un sentido. Probablemente la moralidad femenina se va a ver afectada al haber otorgado la ventaja al hijo ilegítimo.

—Bueno, de hecho —dijo Sir Hugo con su tranquilidad habitual—, dado que el chico está allí, esta es la mejor alternativa para disponer las cosas. Grandcourt no tenía a nadie más cercano que a su primo. Y es un pensamiento extravagante irse de esta vida beneficiando solo a un primo. Los hombres disfrutan bastante haciendo su testamento, si es para sus propios retoños; pero es una molestia cuando estás legándolo todo a un tipo acabado como tú, y encima a uno que no te importa un comino. Es casi lo peor que te puede suceder, tener solo a una persona a la que puedas dejar tu hacienda. No; yo perdono a Grandcourt por esta parte de su testamento. Pero, entre nosotros, lo que no le perdono es la situación desahuciada en que ha dejado a su sobrina (*nuestra* sobrina, diría), en una posición peor que si hubiera sido la viuda de un médico. Nada me irrita más que esas reticencias póstumas hacia una mujer. Un hombre debería tener cierto orgullo y cariño por su viuda. Yo lo tendría, lo sé. Creo que es la forma de probar el amor de un hombre: no le teme tanto a la muerte cuando puede pensar que su mujer y sus hijas estarán bien después de ella. Me gusta la historia de esos hombres en la guerra de Crimea[304],

dispuestos a ir a las profanidades del mar si las viudas quedaban bien provistas.

—Ciertamente me ha cogido por sorpresa —dijo el señor Gascoigne—, tanto más porque, al haberme puesto en la situación de un padre respecto a mi sobrina, mostré mi confianza en la aparente generosidad del señor Grandcourt en asuntos económicos, y no hice las suficientes averiguaciones sobre él. Me pareció que hacía lo correcto por las circunstancias. Probablemente piense que tengo la culpa.

—No exactamente. Yo respeto a un hombre porque confíe en otro. Pero tenga en cuenta mi consejo. Si usted casa a otra sobrina, aunque sea con el arzobispo de Canterbury, átelo bien. Su sobrina ya no puede casarse otra vez por primera vez. Y si es un buen tipo, deseará que lo aten. Pero en cuanto a la señora Grandcourt, solo puedo decir que me siento muy cerca de ella porque creo que no se la ha tratado bien. Y espero que usted la animará a que confíe en mí como un amigo.

Así habló el caballeroso Sir Hugo, disgustado porque a la joven y hermosa viuda de un Mallinger Grandcourt le hubiesen dejado solo dos mil libras al año y una casa en una zona de minas de carbón. Para el Rector esos ingresos aparecían menos miserables y menos desprovistos de privaciones mortificadoras; pero esa conversación le había hecho sentir con más intensidad que el baronet la humillación lanzada a su sobrina, además de a sus amigos más cercanos, por la manifiesta divulgación de la relación de su marido con la señora Glasher. Y como todos los hombres que son buenos maridos y padres, veía la humillación con los ojos de las mujeres que iban a ser afectadas por ella; así que la molestia que le causó el oír primero los hechos fue mucho menor que la que sintió al comunicárselos a la señora Davilow, y al anticipar los sentimientos de Gwendolen cuando su madre viera que había llegado la ocasión de contárselos. Pues el buen Rector tenía la inocente convicción de que su sobrina no era consciente de la existencia de la señora Glasher, basándose con enérgica solidez en lo que sabían, hacían y sufrían las mujeres solteras y casadas, habiendo realizado una observación del todo imperfecta de la mujer particular en cuestión tanto de soltera como de casada. No sucedía lo mismo con la madre de Gwendolen, que ahora pensaba que comprendía mucho de la conducta y las palabras tan enigmáticas de su hija antes y después de su compromiso, y concluyó que de alguna forma inconcebible Gwendolen había sido informada de la existencia de esta relación ilegítima y de la existencia de los niños. Confiaba que tendría

oportunidades, en momentos de confidencias afectuosas antes o durante el viaje de regreso a Inglaterra, de averiguar poco a poco de cuánto era consciente Gwendolen del estado de la situación actual y prepararla para cualquier cosa que pudiera significar una decepción. Pero no tuvo ni que esforzarse por sacar el tema.

—Espero que no creas que vaya a ser rica y espléndida, mama —dijo Gwendolen, no mucho después de la comunicación del Rector—; tal vez no me haya dejado nada.

Estaba vestida, y había estado un buen rato sentada meditando. La señora Davilow se sorprendió, pero dijo, tras unos momentos de reflexión:

—Oh, sí, querida, algo tendrás. Sir Hugo conoce todo el testamento.

—Eso no decidirá nada —dijo Gwendolen, con brusquedad.

—Claro que sí, querida: Sir Hugo dice que dispondrás de dos mil libras al año y la casa de Gadsmere.

—Me quedaré con lo que decida aceptar —dijo Gwendolen—. Ni tú ni mi tío debéis intervenir y convencerme sobre esto. Haré todo lo que pueda para hacerte feliz, pero sobre las cosas de mi marido no quiero que os entrometáis. ¿Serán suficientes para ti ochocientas libras al año?

—Más que suficientes, querida. No debes pensar en darme tanto. —La señora Davilow esperó un poco, y luego dijo—: ¿Sabes quién se va a quedar con las fincas y el resto del dinero?

—Sí —dijo Gwendolen, ondeando su mano en señal de querer abandonar el tema—. Lo sé todo. Todo está bien, y prefiero que no lo vuelvas a mencionar nunca.

La madre estaba callada, miró hacia otro lado, y se levantó a por un abanico, con un ligero sonrojo en sus delicadas mejillas. Iba pensando e imaginando cosas, pero no quería encontrarse con los ojos de su hija, y se sentó otra vez bajo una triste represión. Cuánta infelicidad había tenido que soportar tal vez su hija, y como siempre había sucedido, el asunto no iba a tratarse entre ellas. Pero Gwendolen estaba observando a su madre con esa nueva intuición que le había dado la experiencia; y obligándose a calmarse dijo a su madre con cariño:

—Ven y siéntate a mi lado, mamá, y no te pongas triste.

La señora Davilow hizo lo que le dijo, pero se mordió los labios en un vano intento de ocultar sus lágrimas. Gwendolen se apoyó en ella de forma mimosa y le dijo:

—Pretendo ser muy prudente, de verdad. Y muy buena; muy buena contigo, querida y dulce mamaíta, no me conocerás. Pero no tienes que llorar.

La determinación que Gwendolen tenía en su mente era la de preguntar a Deronda si debía aceptar algo del dinero de su marido, si podía aceptar lo necesario para ayudar a su madre. La pobrecilla se sentía fuerte para hacer cualquier cosa que subiese la estima que Deronda tenía por ella.

Sir Hugo las invitó, presionándolas amablemente, para que ella y la señora Davilow fueran enseguida con él a Park Lane, y vivieran en su casa mientras durase el luto y tuvieran que atender algunos detalles necesarios en Londres. La ciudad, insistía, era en esos casos el más apartado de los lugares y propuso él mismo dedicarse a sacar inmediatamente todas las pertenencias de Gwendolen de la casa de la plaza Grosvenor. A ella no le habría satisfecho más otra propuesta que este poder quedarse un poco más en Park Lane. Le sería más fácil concertar una entrevista con Deronda allí, si solo supiera cómo hacerle llegar a sus manos una carta, pidiéndole que viniera. Durante el viaje, Sir Hugo, habiendo comprendido que ella conocía el contenido del testamento de su marido, se aventuró a hablar ante ella y a ella de los planes para su futuro, haciendo referencia a las buenas perspectivas que daba por hechas, y por otra parte, animándola con alegría decorosa por su posición de viuda. Le parecía que era el modo más elegante para una viuda de recuperar su estado de ánimo al averiguar que su marido no la había tratado tan bien como él habría hecho; era culpa del testador si comprometía la pena de ella por su partida dando una razón en el testamento, así que podía suponerse que ella debía aparecer triste, pero no porque él la hubiese dejado, sino porque la había dejado pobre. El baronet, con su bondad avivada doblemente por el viento favorable en su fortuna y por compasión hacia Gwendolen, se había vuelto muy paternal hacia ella, la llamaba «querida», y al mencionar Gadsmere al señor Gascoigne, con sus ventajas y desventajas, habló sobre los que *debíamos* hacer para hacer lo mejor con la propiedad. Gwendolen estaba sentada al lado de Sir Hugo en pálido silencio, mientras Sir Hugo, con su rostro vuelto hacia la señora Davilow o el señor Gascoigne, comentaba que la señora Grandcourt tal vez preferiría que Gadsmere estuviera habitada durante alguna época del año, en cuyo caso pensaba que lo mejor sería arrendarla a alguno de esos hombres relacionados con las minas de carbón: Sir Hugo había visto lo suficiente del sitio para saber que era una caseta tan cómoda y pintoresca como desearía cualquier hombre, siempre que sus deseos se circunscribieran dentro de un área minera.

—A mí mismo no me importaría el hollín —dijo el baronet, con total neutralidad—. Nada es más sano. Y para alguien que tenga sus negocios por esa zona, Gadsmere sería un paraíso. Sale incluso remarcada en la historia del condado escrita por Scrogg, con la pequeña torre y la hermosa bahía, sin duda lo mejor que se imprimió en el libro.

—¿Un lugar más importante que Offendene, entonces? —dijo el señor Gascoigne.

—Bastante más —dijo el baronet, con decisión—. Estuve allí con mi pobre hermano, hace ya más de un cuarto de siglo, pero lo recuerdo muy bien. Puede que las habitaciones no sean muy grandes, pero sí lo son los jardines.

—Nuestro pobre y querido Offendene sigue vacío después de todo —dijo la señora Davilow—. Cuando llegó el momento, el señor Haynes lo declaró disponible, y nadie lo ha tomado desde entonces. Podría haber aceptado la amable oferta de Lord Brackenshaw de permanecer en él otro año sin pagar el alquiler: pues habría mantenido el sitio aireado y habitado.

—Espero que en su lugar tengan algo cómodo —dijo Sir Hugo.

—Demasiado cómodo —dijo el señor Gascoigne, sonriendo a su cuñada —. Más bien os sobrará.

Gwendolen se volvió con un cambio en su mirada cuando su madre habló de que Offendene se había quedado vacío. Esta conversación tuvo lugar en una de las largas e inexplicables paradas que a menudo ocurren en las estaciones de tren extranjeras. Había una quietud de ensueño bajo el sol y sobre los campos sin cercos que se extendían hasta el límite de los álamos; y para Gwendolen la charla del interior del carruaje solo le sugerían que la tierra de ensueño acababa en una región oscura de pozos y minas, y el purgatorio de Gadsmere que jamás visitaría; cuando oyó las palabras de su madre, esta vista soñolienta y confusa pareció disolverse para dar paso a una imagen más clara de Offendene y Pennicote en su aspecto más brillante. Vio las faldas de las colinas, los campos salpicados por el ganado, las plantaciones a la sombra con caminos llenos de baches y de cortezas de árboles apartadas a un lado, los setos bien cuidados en la carretera de la parroquia a Offendene, la avenida desde la que le veían llegar desde la ventana, la puerta del recibidor que se abría, y a su madre o una de las problemáticas hermanas saliendo a recibirla. Toda esa breve experiencia de una casa tranquila que en alguna ocasión había considerado tan aburrida como para escapar de ella, era donde ahora reposaban sus pensamientos: una parada donde encontró el aliento de la mañana y la irreprochable voz de los pájaros siguiendo un reclamo a través de

una gran farsa satánica, en la que había entrado con una credulidad embriagada en sus mentiras, y había visto su fin con miedo a que ella misma no formara parte de los espíritus malignos que revoloteaban por la farsa y se deslizaban a su alrededor con lenguas de serpiente.

De esta forma, los pensamientos de Gwendolen se detuvieron sobre Offendene; pero no dio más muestras de interés en la conversación, igual que no las dio sobre la opinión de Sir Hugo acerca del cable telegráfico o sobre el punto de vista de su tío acerca del proyecto de ley de la abolición de la tasa eclesiástica. ¿Sobre qué temas no hablaríamos durante el interminable viaje de varios días de Génova a Londres? Incluso los desconocidos, tras viajar juntos desde la China hasta el Perú, pueden mostrar demasiadas confidencias y sincerarse con una liberalidad tal que llega a poner en peligro cualquier siguiente encuentro al revelar una mutua impresión de pobreza. Pero el baronet y el Rector se veían presionados a alegrar la conversación: eran como los conocidos obligados a permanecer juntos en un largo viaje de luto que, al observar que la situación es melancólica, proceden a darle la vuelta con un discurso lo más misceláneo posible. «No tengo inconveniente en contarle…» dijo Sir Hugo al Rector, mencionando algunos detalles privados; mientras el Rector, sin expresarlo de esta manera, no tenía inconveniente en contar al baronet cosas sobre sus hijos y la dificultad de situarlos en el mundo.

A fuerza de hablar de todas las personas y cosas que estaban a un tiro de piedra de Diplow, Sir Hugo acabó tomando interés en esa casa antigua, y acabó convencido de que era un deber agradable recuperar y fortalecer su influencia personal en el vecindario, por lo que declaró su intención de llevar a su familia al sitio por uno o dos meses antes de que acabara el otoño; y al señor Gascoigne le entusiasmó la perspectiva. En conjunto, el viaje continuó y finalizó con una mutua simpatía entre los viajeros de género masculino.

Mientras tanto, Gwendolen estaba sentada como alguien que volvía del mundo espiritual con una experiencia incalificable que cubría de una extraña irrealidad toda la charla que estaba oyendo sobre sí misma y sobre los asuntos del mundo; y la señora Davilow se preocupaba principalmente de imaginarse lo que sentía su hija, y preguntándose que había querido decir con esas insinuaciones de si aceptaría o no el legado de su marido. Gwendolen, de hecho, tenía ante sí el muro de un propósito inmediato que apartaba cualquier otra determinación. ¿Cómo escalar el muro? Quería ver y consultar de nuevo a Deronda, para asegurarse de que no daba ningún paso que él desaprobara. ¿Habría conservado los remordimientos o se sentiría libre de culpa si no

hubiera sido por esa conciencia exterior que se materializaba en Deronda? Es difícil decir si tendríamos tales remordimientos si no hubiera alguien que nos juzgara, alguien de cuya opinión dependiese nuestra felicidad, alguien que nos recordase la sentencia del Invisible y Universal que la autocomplacencia y la tolerancia del mundo nos hacen olvidar a menudo. De esta forma, nuestro hermano puede ocupar para nosotros el lugar de Dios, y su opinión, que nos penetra hasta los huesos y la médula, nos empuja a actuar correctamente. Esa misión de Deronda hacia Gwendolen había empezado con lo que ella había sentido que era el juicio que hacía sobre ella en la mesa del juego. Él podía haberlo estropeado todo: malgastamos gran parte de nuestra vida en echar a perder nuestra influencia y hacer que la credulidad que los demás tienen en nosotros se diluya en una amplia y definitiva incredulidad que ellos llaman conocimiento del mundo, pero que es en realidad decepción en ti o en mí. Deronda no había estropeado su misión.

Pero Gwendolen se había olvidado de pedirle su dirección en caso de que quisiese escribirle; y la única forma que tenía de contactar con él era a través de Sir Hugo. Era del todo consciente de la imagen que podía estar dando ante los demás de su dependencia de Deronda, y que era ella la que le buscaba a él, más que él a ella: los reproches de Grandcourt habían alertado lo suficiente a su orgullo. Pero la fuerza y tenacidad de su naturaleza la habían abocado a esa dependencia, y no iba a dejar de contar con la ayuda de Deronda, o a negarse a realizar la entrevista que su alma necesitaba, solo porque había testigos, igual que no lo habría hecho si hubiera estado en prisión en peligro de ser condenada a muerte. Cuando llegaron a Park Lane y se enteró que el baronet iba a bajar a la Abadía inmediatamente (solo para ver un par de días a su familia y luego volver para ocuparse de los asuntos necesarios de Gwendolen), le dijo sin mostrar ninguna duda, mientras su madre estaba presente:

—Sir Hugo, me gustaría ver al señor Deronda lo más pronto posible. No conozco su dirección. ¿Me la podría decir o hacerle saber que quiero verle?

Por el rostro de Sir Hugo cruzó un rápido pensamiento, pero no lo dejó entrever cuando dijo:

—Palabra que no sé si está en su alojamiento o en la Abadía en estos momentos. Pero me aseguraré. Le enviaré una nota ahora mismo a su alojamiento diciéndole que venga, y si está en la Abadía puedo darle tu mensaje y enviarlo aquí inmediatamente. Estoy seguro que querrá satisfacer tu deseo —concluyó el baronet, con seria amabilidad, como si no hubiera

nada más apropiado según el curso de los acontecimientos que enviar tal mensaje.

Pero estaba convencido de que Gwendolen tenía un apego pasional por Deronda, cuyas semillas habían sido sembradas hacía mucho tiempo, y volvió a pensar en su antigua sospecha con más fuerza que nunca: que sus sentimientos iban a llevarla probablemente a cometer imprudencias, de las que el bondadoso Sir Hugo, iba a hacer todo cuanto estaba en su mano para protegerla y defenderla. Para él habría sido una bonita historia que esta dulce criatura y su Dan querido hubieran estado hechos el uno para el otro, y que el inapropiado marido hubiera partido antes de este mundo. A Sir Hugo le gustaba que una mujer hermosa fuera tan feliz como fuera posible. En verdad, lo que más le preocupaba de este asunto era la duda de si el encumbrado e inescrutable Dan no tuviera otra idea en la cabeza que le resultara más querida que la encantadora señora Grandcourt, y que rechazara por completo el matrimonio que se preparaba. Entre las paradojas habituales respecto a los sentimientos de Sir Hugo, que había dado sus consejos paternales a Deronda en contra de mostrar demasiada ternura cuando se comprometiese, se hallaba la de sentirse ahora irritado contra él por la sospecha de no haberse enamorado como debería. Por supuesto, todas estas conjeturas de Sir Hugo eran del todo prematuras, pues solo había pasado una quincena más o menos de la muerte de Grandcourt. Pero forma parte del pensamiento ser o muy prematuro o muy tardío.

No obstante, envió la nota al alojamiento de Deronda, la cual le halló allí.

Capítulo 65

> Oh, sé bienvenida, Fe de ojos puros, Esperanza de blancas manos,
> tú, ángel sostenido por alas de oro.
>
> MILTON[305]

DERONDA RECIBIÓ LAS NOTICIAS DE GWENDOLEN DE REUNIRSE CON ELLA CON bastante agitación, pero las obedeció. No su vanidad, sino su profunda compasión le previno del peligro que hubiera otro corazón que requiriese de él lo que no iba a poder cumplir; y ya no eran imaginaciones suyas, sino que era plenamente consciente, que el alma de Gwendolen se aferraba a la suya con una necesidad pasional. No discutimos la existencia del enojo o del desprecio de una voz que nos emociona; simplemente la sentimos, y no admite réplica. Deronda sentía el destino de esta mujer colgado sobre el de él en un precipicio de desesperación. Cualquiera que le conozca no puede sorprenderse de su confesión interna, que si todo esto hubiera pasado poco más de un año antes, apenas se habría preguntado si la amaba: el impetuoso y determinante impulso que le habría movido habría sido librarla de la pena, proteger su vida para siempre de los peligros de la soledad, y llevar a cabo hasta las últimas consecuencias la redención que había comenzado en ese rescate admonitorio del collar. Pero ahora, el amor y el deber le habían lanzado otros lazos, y ese impulso no podía ya determinar su vida; aun así, seguía presente en él como un anhelo compasivo, un estremecimiento doloroso ante el mismo hecho de imaginarse tener que enfrentarse una y otra vez a la atracción de sus ojos y sus palabras. La misma fuerza de la nueva atadura, la certeza de su determinación, que le hacía separarse de ella, le hizo pensar en el destino de ella con pena aún más dolorosa.

Esperó su llegada en la sala de estar trasera, en ese espacio blanco y carmesí donde habían estado sentados juntos en la fiesta musical, y donde Gwendolen le había dicho por primera vez que su destino dependía de que él no la abandonara, y su atracción pareció haberse fundido en el llanto melódico: *Per pietà non dirmi addio*[306]. Pero la melodía fue pronunciada por la querida voz de Mirah.

Deronda paseaba por esta habitación, que se sabía de memoria después de tantos años, con una extraña sensación de metamorfosis en su vida. Los

objetos familiares que le rodeaban, desde el gentil retrato sonriente de Lady Mallinger a las cabezas también humanas y urbanas de los leones que había sobre las pilastras de la chimenea, parecían pertenecer casi a una existencia previa que revivía solo por los recuerdos, no en la realidad; tan profundas y transformadoras habían sido las impresiones que había experimentado últimamente, tan nuevas eran las condiciones bajo las que se encontraba en la casa en la que se había acostumbrado a pensar como su propio hogar —de pie con su sombrero en la mano, esperando la entrada de una joven criatura cuya vida había sufrido una gran transformación, una trágica transformación hacia un resultado vacilante, en el que sentía con aprensión que él mismo estaba atado a él—.

Pero Gwendolen entró, con aspecto cambiado; no solo por su vestido de luto, sino por una expresión más tranquila y satisfecha que la que vio en su rostro en Génova. La satisfacción consistía en que Deronda estaba allí; pero no se sonrieron mientras se saludaron y se dieron la mano; cada uno de los dos estaba lleno de recuerdos, lleno de previsiones ansiosas. Ella dijo:

—Ha sido muy bueno en venir. Sentémonos —y se sentó inmediatamente en la silla más cercana. Él se situó enfrente de ella.

—Le pedí que viniera porque quiero que me diga qué debería hacer —comenzó, enseguida—. No tenga miedo de decirme lo que usted piensa que es lo correcto, aunque sea duro. Me he hecho a la idea de hacerlo. Tuve miedo una vez de ser pobre; no podía pensar estar al cargo de otras personas; y eso es por lo que hice algo, eso es por lo que me casé. He soportado cosas peores ahora. Creo que podría soportar ser pobre, si usted cree que debería. ¿Sabe lo del testamento de mi marido?

—Sí, me lo dijo Sir Hugo —dijo Deronda, adivinando ya la pregunta que ella tenía que hacer.

—¿Debo aceptar algo de lo que él me ha dejado? Le contaré lo que he estado pensando —dijo Gwendolen, con una ilusión más nerviosa—. Tal vez no sepa del todo que en realidad yo pensaba en mi madre cuando me casé. Yo era egoísta, pero la quería, y me daba lástima su pobreza; y lo que más me consoló al principio, cuando era desgraciada, era verla en mejor estado gracias a mi matrimonio. Lo más duro para mí sería verla ahora de nuevo sumida en la pobreza; y he estado pensando que si tomo lo suficiente para mantenerla, y no más (nada para mí), no sería incorrecto; pues mi madre me quería mucho… y él me apartó de ella… y él lo hizo a propósito… y si ella lo hubiera sabido…

Gwendolen rompió a llorar. Se había estado preparando para esta entrevista pensando casi exclusivamente en esta cuestión de hacer lo correcto para su madre; pero la cuestión había llevado consigo pensamientos y razonamientos que le resultaban imposibles de exteriorizar, y estos recuerdos peligrosos pululaban entre sus palabras, haciendo que sonasen cada vez más agitadas y temblorosas. Se miró impotente las manos, desprovistas ahora de todos sus anillos salvo el de casada.

—No se maltrate hablando de esa forma —dijo Deronda con ternura—. No hay necesidad; el caso es muy simple. Creo que apenas puedo equivocarme al juzgarlo. Usted me consulta porque soy la única persona a la cual ha confiado la parte más dolorosa de su experiencia: y yo puedo entender sus escrúpulos. —Se detuvo un momento, esperando que ella se recuperara. El silencio le parecía a Gwendolen lleno de la ternura que oyó en su voz, y tuvo el coraje de alzar sus ojos y mirarle mientras él le decía—: Es usted consciente de algo que le parece un crimen contra alguien que está muerto. Usted cree que ha perdido cualquier derecho como esposa. Le asusta quedarse con lo que era de él. Quiere no aprovecharse de su muerte. Sus sentimientos le impulsan incluso a castigarse a sí misma, a reprenderse por ir en contra de su buena voluntad, la voluntad que luchaba contra la tentación. Yo también he pasado por algo de eso. ¿Le comprendo bien?

—Sí, por fin quiero ser buena, no como lo que he sido —dijo Gwendolen —, intentaré soportar lo que usted crea que debo hacer. He intentado contarle lo peor de mí misma. ¿Qué debería hacer ahora?

—Si nadie más estuviera implicado en esta cuestión de los ingresos —dijo Deronda—, no me atrevería a ir en contra de sus remordimientos; pero creo que sus sentimientos hacia la señora Davilow son una buena guía en estos momentos, y me parece bastante justo. No pienso en absoluto que las obligaciones de su marido incluso hacia usted tengan que anularse por ningún acto que haya usted cometido. Él entró voluntariamente en su vida, y afectó su curso en el momento más trascendental. Pero dejando eso aparte, era un deber de su posición mantener a su madre, y por supuesto, entendía que en caso de que tuviera que aplicarse el testamento, ella compartiría también lo que le dejaba a usted.

—Ella tenía ochocientas libras al año. Lo que pensé es tomar eso y dejar libre el resto —dijo Gwendolen. Había estado tanto tiempo razonándolo en su interior como un pequeño permiso, que no podía tomar ahora otra actitud.

—Creo que no es su deber fijar un límite en ese sentido —dijo Deronda —. Crearía un doloroso enigma para la señora Davilow; si usted se niega a recibir nada, el resto sería como veneno para ella. Y su propia vida sería muy difícil. Acordamos en Génova que su carga de conciencia no debe saberla nadie. Promoverá mejor la futura beneficencia de su vida ahorrándoles a los demás la pena de ese conocimiento. En mi opinión, debería conformarse con lo que le ha dejado su marido en el testamento, y que sus remordimientos se apliquen solo al uso que quiera hacer de esa independencia económica.

Al pronunciar la última frase Deronda cogió automáticamente su sombrero, que había dejado en el suelo a su lado. Gwendolen, sensible a sus más ligeros movimientos, sintió que su corazón daba un vuelco, como si también tuviera su propia conciencia, y quisiera impedirle que se marchara: se levantó al mismo tiempo de su silla, sin darse cuenta que el movimiento era una aceptación de su aparente intención de dejarla; y Deronda, por supuesto, también se levantó, y avanzó un poco.

—Haré lo que usted me diga —dijo Gwendolen, apresuradamente—; ¿pero qué más debo hacer? —No se le ocurrían más que estas simples palabras; e incluso eran mucho para ella en ese estado de emoción en el que su orgulloso misterio estaba destronado: mientras sus frases infantiles salían de sus labios, formaron en ella una imagen de su propia impotencia, y no pudo refrenar el sollozo que envió grandes lágrimas a sus ojos. Deronda, también, sintió un dolor aplastante; pero veía las consecuencias inminentes, y se obligó con mucho esfuerzo a permanecer impasible. Cuando ella se secó las lágrimas, le dijo en un tono amable a modo de pregunta:

—Probablemente se reunirá pronto con la señora Davilow en el campo.

—Sí, en una semana o diez días. —Gwendolen esperó un instante, volviendo la mirada hacia la ventana, como si mirara hacia un futuro imaginario—. Quiero ser amable con ellas; ellas pueden ser más felices que yo. ¿Es eso lo mejor que puedo hacer?

—Eso pienso. No debe tener ninguna duda en cuanto a ese deber —dijo Deronda. Se detuvo un poco entre sus frases, sintiendo el peso de la ansiedad en todas sus palabras—. De ese deber se desprenderán otros. Considerar su vida como una deuda puede parecerle la visión más triste desde la distancia; pero no será así. Lo que es triste en la vida es la falta de una motivación: pero una vez comience a actuar de esta forma penitente, amando el propósito que tiene en su interior, encontrará satisfacciones inesperadas, surgirán nuevas

necesidades, que continuamente le harán vivir el día a día. Verá que su vida crece como una planta.

Gwendolen posó sus ojos en él con la mirada de alguien sediento que oye el sonido de aguas que no ve. Deronda sintió la mirada como si hubiera estirado sus brazos hacia él desde una costa abandonada. Su voz adquirió un matiz afectuoso y casi de súplica cuando dijo:

—Esta pena, que le ha afectado hasta la médula, le ha llegado siendo muy joven; intente considerarla no como algo que ha arruinado su vida, sino como algo que la ha preparado para ella. Que sea una preparación… —Cualquiera que oyera cómo hablaba habría pensado que le suplicaba por su propia felicidad—. Mire, usted se ha salvado de las peores maldades que podría haber venido de su matrimonio, que ya sabe fue un error. Ha visto usted lo que es actuar de forma ofensiva y egoísta, una visión de lo que es la degradación; imagine que un ángel severo, viéndola tomar el camino del error, la ha cogido por la muñeca y le ha mostrado el horror de la vida que tiene que evitar. Y este ángel se ha presentado en su juventud. Considérelo una preparación. Usted puede, usted estará entre las mejores mujeres, y hará que otras se sientan contentas de haber nacido.

Las palabras le sonaban a Gwendolen como si una mano milagrosa la acariciase. Varias emociones entremezcladas fluían en ella con una fuerza que parecía dar comienzo a una nueva existencia, proporcionándole un nuevo poder que se revolvía en su interior. Tan llena de energía es la esperanza divina de la recuperación moral. Tan potente es en nosotros la acción inculcada por otra alma, ante la cual nos postramos a causa de un amor completo. Pero la nueva existencia parecía inseparable de Deronda: la esperanza parecía requerir que su presencia fuera permanente. No pensaba que él la amase y se aferrase a ella, ese pensamiento habría resultado improbable; pero se alimentaba de ello. Por primera vez desde ese terrible momento en el mar, apareció un sonrojo que se extendió por sus mejillas, por la frente y el cuello, se intensificó por unos instantes, y luego desapareció gradualmente. Ella no dijo nada.

Deronda avanzó y le ofreció su mano diciendo:

—No debo cansarla.

Ella se asustó ante la sensación de que se iba a ir, y puso su mano en la suya, todavía sin decir nada.

—Todavía parece enferma, aún no es usted misma —añadió, mientras sostenía su mano.

—No puedo dormir mucho —contestó ella, volviendo a desanimarse un poco—. Así se repiten las cosas para mí. Vuelven, siempre vuelven —concluyó, temblando; un temor helado la amenazaba.

—Poco a poco serán menos insistentes —dijo Deronda. No podía soltar la mano ni alejarse bruscamente.

—Sir Hugo dice que se establecerá en Diplow —dijo Gwendolen, aprovechando unas palabras anteriores que se le habían escapado—. ¿Usted también vendrá?

—Probablemente —dijo Deronda, y al darse cuenta que la palabra era fría, añadió, corrigiéndose—: Sí, vendré —y entonces soltó su mano, con la presión amistosa del que se está despidiendo.

—¿Y no volverá aquí, antes de que deje la ciudad? —dijo Gwendolen, con tímida tristeza y más pálida que nunca.

¿Qué podía decir Deronda?

—Si puedo ayudarla en algo, si usted me necesita, por supuesto que vendré.

—Lo necesito —dijo Gwendolen, con ímpetu—; usted sabe que lo necesito. ¿Qué fuerza tengo yo? ¿A quién más puedo acudir? —De nuevo le afloraba el llanto.

Deronda sintió una punzada de dolor, que se mostró en su rostro. Parecía triste cuando dijo:

—Por supuesto que vendré.

Gwendolen percibió el cambio en su cara; pero el intenso alivio que suponía esperarle de nuevo no dejaba lugar a otros sentimientos, y recuperó parte de su esperanza y su coraje.

—No se entristezca por mí —dijo ella, con seguridad y afecto—. Recordaré sus palabras, cada una de ellas. Recordaré lo que usted creyó de mí; lo intentaré.

Ella le miró con firmeza, y le tendió su mano otra vez como si hubiera olvidado lo que había pasado desde las palabras de él que ella prometía recordar. Pero no había ni la más mínima expresión de una sonrisa en sus labios. No había sonreído desde la muerte de su marido. Cuando estaba quieta y en silencio parecía una estatua melancólica de la Gwendolen tan dispuesta a reír cuando los demás estaban serios.

Solo recordando la angustia minuciosa que había cambiado para ella el aspecto del mundo podemos entender su conducta hacia Deronda, la apertura irreflexiva, o aún más, las súplicas inoportunas con las que expresó su

dependencia de él. No le importaban lo que pensaran de ella otros espectadores indiferentes, ni aunque hubiera estado rodeada de llamas, y se habría lanzado a sus brazos abiertos y se habría colgado de su cuello para que él pudiera protegerla para siempre. Lo identificaba con el duro proceso regenerador que se había producido en ella junto con su acción. ¿A alguien le sorprende que ella viera su propia necesidad reflejada en los sentimientos de él? Se hallaba en ese estado de dependencia y expectación inconsciente, una experiencia que todos sentimos cuando solo nos preocupan nuestros problemas o nuestros propósitos. Atribuimos a los demás nuestros sentimientos, y creemos que actuarán según nuestras motivaciones. No se había imaginado una unión futura con Deronda más que el vínculo espiritual que continuamente se iba estrechando; pero tampoco se imaginaba estar separada de él. La seducción y el matrimonio, ¿cómo iban ahora a ser el imaginario del apego profundo de la pobre Gwendolen? El todopoderoso Amor había puesto su mano sobre ella; ¿pero qué es lo que le había pedido a ella? Aceptación o rechazo, la dura tarea de cambiarse a sí misma… confesión… resistencia. ¿Qué importaba que llorase ante él? Lloró pues, como una niña que ha tropezado y reclama ser cogida de la mano, para no perderse.

El llanto traspasó a Deronda. ¿En qué posición más difícil podría encontrarse un hombre lleno de ternura, pero con una fuerte prudencia? Era la única criatura que conocía la verdadera naturaleza del problema de Gwendolen: retirarse y apartarse de ella sería abocarla a una peligrosa soledad. No se podría perdonar la crueldad de aparentar rechazar su dependencia de él; y aun así, notaba que a corto o largo plazo algo se torcería, y que cualquier intento de estrechar su vínculo empeoraría las cosas.

Estaba obligado a arriesgar eso. Fue varias veces a Park Lane antes de que Gwendolen se marchara; pero sus entrevistas las realizaban en presencia de la señora Davilow, y eran, por tanto, menos agitadas. Gwendolen, desde que decidió aceptar sus ingresos, había concebido un proyecto del que quería hablar: situar a su madre y a sus hermanas con ella en Offendene otra vez, y, como decía, recuperar la vida que llevaban cuando estaban allí por primera vez y todo era felicidad para ella, aunque no era consciente de ello. Había mencionado la idea a Sir Hugo, quien se ocuparía de alquilar Gadsmere, lo que pagaría de sobra la renta de Offendene. Le dijo todo esto a Deronda, el cual se entretenía gustosamente en un tema que parecía una consoladora distracción para Gwendolen. Él no dijo nada y ella no preguntó nada sobre en

qué se ocupaba principalmente él. A ella le obsesionaba que él viniese a Diplow antes de que se acabase el otoño; y no pensaba más en los Lapidoth —la pequeña judía y su hermano— como gente que pudiera intervenir más en su destino que lo que hacía la levadura política y social en la historia del mundo. De hecho, los recuerdos de la pobre Gwendolen estaban aturdidos, y todo lo que quedaba fuera de la huella dejada por su problemática conciencia, y de su esfuerzo por librarse de ella, quedaba para ella en un olvido oscuro.

Capítulo 66

> Todavía un día agitado entre los días tranquilos.
>
> BROWNING, *El Anillo y el Libro*[307]

MIENTRAS TANTO, ESDRAS Y MIRAH, A LOS QUE GWENDOLEN NO INCLUÍA CUANDO pensaba en Deronda, estaban intimando aún más su relación, iluminándola por completo.

Lapidoth padre había dejado a su hija en el rellano de la puerta, dándole vueltas a la idea de apostar en el juego la cantidad de dinero que poseía, quedándose estrictamente con lo necesario para comer, sin pensar en otras alternativas o determinaciones. Hasta que no lo perdiera todo no iba a pensar si le pediría más a Mirah de nuevo o si afrontaría la presencia de su hijo. En un primer momento, se asustó de tener que encontrarse con Esdras como se habría asustado ante cualquier otra situación restrictiva desagradable; y la posesión del bolso de Mirah era suficiente para despejar el pensamiento de futuras necesidades. El apetito por el juego es mucho más dominante que el hambre corporal, que puede ser neutralizada por una excitación emocional o intelectual; pero la pasión por calcular posibilidades de ganancias —el habitual equilibrio mental suspensivo del juego imaginario o real— anula la susceptibilidad por cualquier otra excitación. En su etapa final, en la que ya no hay vuelta atrás, parece como si se liberaran del interior una multitud de demonios, buscando la diversión en la perdición.

Pero cualquier forma de egoísmo, por muy abstracta e inhumana que sea, requiere el soporte de al menos una comida al día; y aunque el apetito de Lapidoth por la comida y la bebida eran extremadamente moderados, había caído en una miserable forma de vida en la que no podía satisfacer el apetito sin algo de dinero rápido. Cuando, tras una breve visita a una casa anunciada como «Pirámides» en la celosía de la ventana, en la que había doblado y luego triplicado los treinta chelines de Mirah para al final acabar perdiéndolos todos, salió con el monedero vació en su bolsillo, valorando ya en su interior si debía seguir apostando, empeñando el monedero, o si debía volver a ver a Mirah, dando una buena imagen al devolver el monedero, y diciendo que había usado el dinero para pagar una deuda que le estaba apretando. Además,

entre las sensibilidades que aún conservaba Lapidoth estaba la de reclamar lo que era suyo, y de verdad creía que cualquier propiedad que sus hijos poseyeran era también suya; eso era algo que tenía más inculcado que la justa indignación de su hijo. Después de todo, irse a vivir con sus hijos era lo mejor que podía hacer; y cuanto más pensaba en encontrarse con Esdras menos miedo le daba, pues estaba más acostumbrado a confiar en las posibilidades de conseguir algo seguro y sin esfuerzo, que a verse amenazado por una humillación privada. No había tenido mucha suerte últimamente; esperaba que cambiase, ¿y no podría empezar el cambio con lo que pudiera sacar de los asuntos de su hija y de los buenos amigos de los que había hablado? Lapidoth contaba con la fascinación de su inteligencia, una vieja costumbre sancionada por la experiencia reciente; no solo son las mujeres las que no se dan cuenta de que su encanto disminuye, o las que se imaginan que pueden fingir que no están desgastadas.

El resultado del rápido balance de Lapidoth fue que se dirigió hacia la pequeña plaza de Brompton con la esperanza de que, paseando por allí y echando un vistazo, pudiera ver a Mirah saliendo o volviendo a casa, en cuyo caso su entrada en la casa sería aún más fácil. Pero ya casi era de noche —la noche del día siguiente al que la había visto por primera vez—; y tras esperar un poco, el cansancio le hizo reflexionar que podía llamar al timbre, y si no estaba en casa podía preguntar a qué hora llegaría. Pero al acercarse a la casa, supo que estaba en ella: la oyó cantando.

Mirah, sentada al piano, estaba declamando el *Herz, mein Herz*[308], mientras Esdras escuchaba con los ojos cerrados, cuando la señora Adam abrió la puerta, y dijo con cierto embarazo:

—Un caballero aquí abajo dice que es su padre, señorita.

—Bajaré a verle —dijo Mirah, levantándose inmediatamente y mirando a su hermano.

—No, Mirah, no así —dijo Esdras con decisión—. Déjele que suba, señora Adam.

Mirah se quedó de pie pellizcándose las manos, intranquila por la ansiedad, a la vez que seguía mirando a Esdras, que también se había levantado, y estaba visiblemente estremecido. Pero había una expresión en su rostro que ella nunca había visto; tenía el cejo fruncido, y sus labios parecían endurecidos con la misma severidad que destellaban de sus ojos.

Cuando la señora Adam abrió la puerta para dejar entrar al padre, no pudo evitar echar una mirada al grupo, y tras mirar primero al hijo y luego al padre,

se dijo a sí misma mientras cerraba la puerta: «Su padre, sin duda». La semejanza residía en los rasgos, que siempre resulta más llamativa en la primera impresión; la expresión contrastaba fuertemente por esas diferencias ocultas o apenas destacables que solo el genio de un Cromwell puede conseguir de forma que su aspecto exterior pareciera el de un padre que no fuese más que un honrado parroquiano.

Lapidoth llevaba una expresión melancólica de antemano, pero mostró una verdadera mueca de dolor cuando dijo:

—Bueno, Esdras, hijo mío, apenas me conoces después de tantos años.

—Te conozco, demasiado bien, padre —dijo Esdras, con cierta solemnidad mordaz que convirtió la palabra padre en un reproche.

—Ah, no estás satisfecho conmigo. No me sorprende. Las apariencias van en mi contra. Cuando un hombre pasa penurias no puede hacer lo que querría, he sufrido mucho, lo sé —dijo Lapidoth rápidamente. Al hablar siempre recuperaba su labia y su audacia; y ahora, volviéndose hacia Mirah, le entregó el monedero, diciendo—: Aquí está tu monedero, querida. Pensé que estarías ansiosa por él a causa de ese pequeño escrito. Verás que lo he vaciado, pues tenía una deuda de comida y alojamiento que pagar. Sabía que querrías que me comportase bien, y aquí estoy, sin un céntimo en el bolsillo, a merced de mis hijos; podéis echarme si queréis, sin llamar a la policía. Solo tienes que decirlo, Mirah, di: «Padre, ya he tenido bastante de ti, me has mimado, y te lo has gastado todo en mí, cuando yo no podía haber hecho nada sin ti; pero ahora me las puedo arreglar mejor», dilo, y me iré tan rápido como una centella. No voy a arruinar tu felicidad otra vez. —Las lágrimas acudieron a su voz como siempre, antes de que acabara.

—Sabes que nunca podría decirlo, padre —contestó Mirah, no sin angustia porque sentía la falsedad de todo su discurso, salvo el deseo implícito de quedarse en la casa.

—¡Mirah, hermana, déjanos solos! —dijo Esdras con autoridad.

Ella miró a su hermano titubeante, suplicante, con temor a su decisión, pero incapaz de marcharse sin interceder por este padre que era como algo que había crecido en ella con dolor. Se acercó a su hermano, y poniendo su mano en la suya, dijo en voz baja, pero no tan baja como para no ser oída por Lapidoth:

—Recuerda, Esdras, que dijiste que mi madre no le habría echado.

—Confía en mí, y sal —dijo Esdras.

Dejó la habitación, pero tras subir unos cuantos peldaños de las escaleras, se sentó con el corazón palpitante. Sí, a causa de algo que le dijera su hermano se fuera…

Lapidoth intuía lo que le esperaba por parte de su hijo, pero estaba empezando a amoldarse a la situación y a encontrar un punto de vista que le permitiera mantener una fría superioridad ante cualquier intento de humillarle. Este hijo demacrado, que hablaba como si fuera desde el sepulcro, mostraba esa incongruencia que la frivolidad egoísta aprende a ver en el sufrimiento y en la muerte, hasta que las garras implacables de la enfermedad se aferran a su propia carne. Cualquier sermón que le predicara se lo tomaría, por supuesto, como un hombre que huye de la prisión y entrando en una catedral para buscar allí refugio oye el murmullo religioso que hay dentro. Lapidoth no había nacido con este tipo de insensibilidad: la había adquirido.

—Esta casa que tenemos aquí —comenzó Esdras—, es pagada en parte por la generosidad de un amigo querido que me mantiene, y en parte por los trabajos de mi hermana, que se mantiene a sí misma. Mientras tengamos una casa no te sacaremos de ella. No te dejaremos a la merced de tus vicios. Pues eres nuestro padre, y aunque has roto el lazo por tu parte, nosotros reconocemos la nuestra. Pero nunca confiaré en ti. Te fugaste con el dinero, dejando tus deudas sin pagar; abandonaste a mi madre; le robaste a su niña pequeña y le destrozaste el corazón; te has convertido en un jugador, y donde antes había vergüenza y conciencia solo queda un deseo insaciable; estabas dispuesto a vender a mi hermana, la habrías vendido si no te hubieran negado el precio. Un hombre que ha hecho estas cosas no merece que se confíe en él nunca más. Compartiremos nuestra comida contigo, tendrás ropa y cama. Cumpliremos este deber hacia ti, porque eres nuestro padre. Pero nunca confiaremos en ti. Eres un hombre malvado: hiciste desgraciada a nuestra madre. Que un hombre así sea nuestro padre es una señal en nuestra carne que no dejará nunca de dolernos. Pero el Eterno nos la ha puesto; y aunque la justicia humana te azotaría por tus crímenes, y tu cuerpo caería desvalido ante el desprecio público, nosotros aún diríamos: «Este es nuestro padre; apartaos, que nos lo llevamos fuera de vuestra vista».

Lapidoth, al amoldarse a lo que le esperaba, no había sido capaz de prever la intensidad exacta de la descarga o el curso exacto que tomaría: que no caería fuera de su armadura, sino que la atravesaría. No podía prever lo que era tan nuevo para él como la voz que provenía del alma de su hijo. Hizo resurgir en él ese brote de excitabilidad histérica del que Mirah había sido

testigo tantas veces cuando se sentaba en casa y sollozaba. Cuando Esdras terminó, Lapidoth se dejó caer en una silla y lloró como una mujer, enterrando su rostro contra la mesa, y aun así, por extraño que parezca, aunque este llanto histérico era una reacción inevitable bajo la presión de las palabras de su hijo, era también un recurso consciente ante una dificultad; igual que cuando era joven, cuando era un joven de rostro brillante y pelo rizado, se había acostumbrado a valerse de esta susceptibilidad física sutilmente traída a colación para dar la vuelta a una situación de resentimiento o de desaprobación.

Esdras se sentó de nuevo sin decir nada, exhausto por la impresión de su propio discurso irreprimible, el estallido de los sentimientos que durante años se había tragado en soledad y silencio. Sus manos delgadas temblaban sobre los brazos del sillón; apenas habría tenido voz para contestar a una pregunta; se sentía como si hubiera dado un paso hacia la Muerte, que le llamaba. Mientras tanto, el rápido y expectante oído de Mirah detectó un sonido que reconoció su corazón: y no pudo permanecer más tiempo fuera de la habitación. Pero al abrir la puerta lo que primero la alarmó fue Esdras, y fue corriendo a su lado, tomando su mano temblorosa entre las suyas, y él las apretó, y encontró en ellas consuelo; pero no dijo nada, ni siquiera la miró. El padre, con la cara contra la mesa, era consciente de que Mirah había entrado, y elevó su cabeza, se frotó los ojos con su pañuelo, le ofreció su mano, y dijo con ronquedad lastimera:

—Adiós, Mirah; tu padre no te molestará ya más. Merece morir como un perro en la cuneta, y eso hará. Si tu madre hubiera vivido, me habría perdonado; hace treinta cuatro años puse el anillo en su dedo bajo la *Jupá*[309], y nos hicimos uno. Me habría perdonado, y habríamos pasado juntos nuestra vejez. Pero no lo he merecido. Adiós.

Se levantó de la silla mientras decía el ultimo «adiós». Mirah había puesta su mano en la suya y le sostenía. No había lágrimas en sus ojos ni parecía dolida, sino asustada y estremecida, cuando gritó:

—¡No, padre, no! —Luego, volviéndose hacia su hermano—: Esdras, ¿no le habrás rechazado? Quédate, padre, y deja las cosas malas. Esdras, no puedo soportarlo. ¿Cómo puedo decir a mi padre: «¡Lárgate y muere!»?

—Yo no he dicho eso —contestó Esdras, con gran esfuerzo—. Le he dicho: «Quédate y tendrás cobijo».

—Entonces te quedarás, padre, y dejarás que te cuidemos, y vendrás conmigo —dijo Mirah, arrastrándolo hacia la puerta.

Esto era en realidad lo que quería Lapidoth. Y por el momento, sintió una especie de consuelo al recobrar la debida asistencia de su hija, y pensó que sería posible cambiar de hábitos. Ella le condujo hasta el recibidor de abajo y le dijo:

—Esta es mi sala de estar cuando no estoy con Esdras, y hay un dormitorio detrás que será el tuyo. Te quedarás y serás bueno, padre. Imagínate que has vuelto con mi madre, y que te ha perdonado, ella te habla a través de mí. —El tono de Mirah era suplicante, pero no pudo darle ninguna de las caricias que solía darle.

Lapidoth recuperó enseguida su compostura, empezó a hablar a Mirah de la mejora de su voz, y de otros temas agradables, y cuando la señora Adam vino a traerle su cena, le dio conversación para mostrarle que no era una persona corriente, aunque sus ropas hablaban ahora en su contra.

Pero en su desvelo nocturno habitual, volvió a preguntarse cuánto dinero tendría Mirah, y regresó mentalmente a la *Roulette*, reproduciendo el método de su juego, y las acciones que lo habían frustrado. Había tenido sus razones para venir a Inglaterra, pero para casi todo era un país maldito.

Estas fueron las visiones más fuertes que tuvo Lapidoth esa noche, y no la imagen desgastada de su iracundo hijo como juez terrible. Esdras pasó por la mesa del juego, y sus palabras eran audibles; pero pasó como un espíritu insustancial, y sus palabras quedaron ahogadas por los números y movimientos que parecían formar el mismo tejido de la consciencia de Lapidoth.

Capítulo 67

> La divinidad que hay en nosotros extrae nuestras acciones más nobles a partir de nuestro egoísmo más reacio.

PARA DERONDA, CUANDO REGRESÓ DE LA ABADÍA, FUE UNA DESAGRADABLE sorpresa encontrarse al indeseable padre instalado en las estancias de Bromptom. Mirah había creído necesario hablar a su padre de Deronda, e incluso hacerle plenamente consciente tanto como pudo de la forma en que había comenzado su amistad con Esdras, y de la comprensión que la había cimentado. Pasó más por encima sobre lo que Deronda había hecho por ella, omitiendo igualmente el rescate en el río, y hablando en su lugar del refugio que había encontrado en la familia de la señora Meyrick para dejar que su padre infiriera que fue a través de estos amigos que había conocido a Deronda. No quiso hacer una narración más completa: no podía dejar que el aliento de su padre pasara por encima de su relación con Deronda. Y Lapidoth, tenía sus razones para no preguntarle sobre las circunstancias de su huida y su llegada a Inglaterra. Pero estaba muy interesado en el hecho que sus hijos tuvieran un amigo benefactor que al parecer está en una posición alta en el mundo.

Fue el hermano el que contó a Deronda esta nueva condición que se añadía a sus vidas.

—Estoy tranquilo ahora al mirarle —concluyó Esdras—, y estoy tentado a creer posible que la ternura de mi hermana, y el vivir diariamente una vida tranquila, puede conseguir alejarle de la tentación. Le ha dado la orden de no confiarle nada de dinero, y ella me lo ha prometido. La he convencido de que, con el dinero, él construiría su propia destrucción.

La primera vez que Deronda vino fue al tercer día de la llegada de Lapidoth. Las ropas nuevas para las que le habían tomado medidas no estaban aún listas, y queriendo dar una impresión favorable, no quiso presentarse con sus ropas viejas. Observó a Deronda marcharse desde la ventana, y se sorprendió por su juventud, que Mirah no le había mencionado, y que había descartado por completo en un personaje que había entablado una seria amistad y compartido estudios aburridos con el sepulcral Esdras. Lapidoth empezó a pensar que el verdadero o principal motivo debía ser que se había

enamorado de Mirah. Tanto mejor si así era; pues un vínculo con Mirah prometía más indulgencia hacia el padre que un vínculo con Esdras: y Lapidoth todavía tenía la esperanza de hacerse valer ante Deronda y de suavizar cualquier prejuicio negativo que tuviera. Se estaba comportando con mucha docilidad, e intentaba por todos los medios a su alcance conseguir una buena relación con sus hijos: escuchar la música de Mirah, procurar no fumar en casa (cosa que la señora Adam no toleraba en su recibidor), y pasear por la plaza con su pipa alemana y el tabaco que Mirah le proporcionaba. Era demasiado aguado como para mostrar cualquier queja contra la prohibición de recibir dinero; Mirah le dijo que debía soportarlo como un deber solemne prometido a su hermano. Estaba lo suficientemente cómodo como para esperar.

La siguiente vez que vino Deronda, Lapidoth, vestido con sus ropas nuevas, y satisfecho con su propia apariencia, estaba en la habitación con Esdras, que estaba aprendiendo, como parte de sus severas obligaciones, tolerar la presencia de su padre siempre que se le impusiera. Deronda se mostró frío y distante a la primera vista de este hombre que había arruinado las vidas de su mujer y de sus hijos, creando en él una repulsa que se materializaba incluso en una incomodad física. Pero Lapidoth no se dejó desalentar, pidió que le dejaran permanecer y oír cómo leían los documentos del viejo cofre, e incluso resultó de ayuda para descifrar un manuscrito difícil en alemán. Esto le llevó a sugerir que sería deseable hacer una trascripción del manuscrito, y ofreció su ayuda para tal propósito, así como para hacer copias de cualquier documento con caracteres latinos. Observó que, aunque los ojos de Esdras se iban debilitando, los suyos todavía eran fuertes. Deronda aceptó el ofrecimiento, pensando que era una buena señal que Lapidoth quisiera servir de algo; y vio una expresión de gratitud en el rostro de Deronda, el cual, no obstante, dijo:

—Que todas las copias se hagan aquí; no puedo confiar que los papeles salgan de mi vista, pues podría haber un accidente quemándose o algo parecido.

El pobre Esdras se sentía como si tuviera a un convicto bajo su cargo. A menos que viera trabajar a su padre, no era posible creer que actuaría de buena fe. Pero al arreglar las cosas de esta manera acarreó sobre sí mismo la carga de la presencia de su padre, que era dolorosa no solo por sus profundas y serias asociaciones, sino también por el temperamento intranquilo de Lapidoth, que se mostraba realmente tal cual era a medida que se

familiarizaba con la situación, y perdía la sensación de sobrecogimiento provocada por su hijo. El hecho era que se estaba refrenando para ganarse el favor de Deronda; y como cualquier hombre cubierto con una prenda incómoda, se desfogaba ante cualquier oportunidad, saliendo a fumar, o moviéndose y hablando, o echándose hacia atrás en su silla y quedándose en silencio, pero sin dejar de expresarse a través de sus movimientos faciales o de sus gestos: y si Mirah estaba en la habitación, caía en su vieja costumbre de hablar con ella, cotilleando sobre su antiguo estilo de vida y sus compañeros, o repitiendo ocurrencias e historias, y argumentos de las obras que solía adaptar, creyendo que podría recuperar si se lo proponía la vivacidad de épocas anteriores. Todo esto era una gran mortificación para Esdras; y cuando Mirah estaba en casa intentaba aliviarle la pena, llevándose a su padre abajo al recibidor y vigilándole allí. ¿Qué deber consta solo de un único propósito difícil? La dificultad radica en las consecuencias inquebrantables diarias que estropean el bendito retorno de la mañana con la perspectiva de reprimir la irritación o de soportar la vergüenza. Y tales consecuencias, como muchas otras, eran soportadas por estos hijos heroicos de un padre indigno, con la perspectiva, al menos en Mirah, de salir hacia delante en la vida.

Mientras, la presencia de Lapidoth había levantado un muro invisible entre Deronda y Mirah, cada uno de ellos temiendo sus suposiciones internas e interpretando erróneamente la creciente reserva y timidez del otro. Pero no pasó mucho tiempo antes de que Deronda viera un poco la luz.

Tan pronto como pudo, tras volver de su breve visita a la Abadía, había llamado a las habitaciones de Hans Meyrick, sintiendo, por más de un motivo, además del de la debida amistad, que tenía que contar a Hans las razones de su reciente viaje, y el cambio de intenciones que había comportado. Hans no estaba allí; le dijeron que había ido al campo durante unos días; y Deronda, tras dejarle una nota, esperó una semana, creyendo que recibiría una nota en respuesta. Pero al no recibir nada, y temiendo que algo le hubiera sentado mal al imprevisible y susceptible Hans, del que sabía que su estancia en la Abadía había sido aplazada, fue a verle una segunda vez, y le dejaron entrar al taller de pintura, donde encontró a su amigo cubierto con un ligero abrigo, sin chaleco, con el pelo aún mojado tras haberse dado un baño, pero con un rostro que aparecía gastado y marchito; donde menos parecía haber estado era en el campo. Había cogido su paleta y sus pinceles, y estaba delante de su caballete

cuando entró Deronda, pero parecía que todo el equipo había sido dispuesto rápidamente hacía poco.

Mientras se estrecharon las manos, Deronda dijo:

—No tienes aspecto de haber estado en el campo, amigo. ¿Es en Cambridge donde has estado?

—No —dijo Hans, secamente, lanzando su paleta como si hubiera estado fingiendo por error; y arrastrando una silla hacia Deronda, se dejó caer en otra, y se inclinó hacia atrás con las manos en la cabeza, mientras continuó—: he estado en no sé dónde, en tierra de nadie, y es un país mortalmente desagradable.

—No querrás decir que has estado bebiendo, Hans —dijo Deronda, que se había sentado enfrente de él, inspeccionándole con ansiedad.

—No he hecho algo tan bueno. He estado fumando opio. Siempre quise hacerlo en algún momento u otro, ver cuánto éxtasis se desprende de ello; y al encontrarme abandonado de otro éxtasis, creí que era lo más prudente aprovechar la oportunidad. Pero te doy mi palabra de no volver a abrir el grifo de ese éxtasis. Va en contra de mi constitución.

—¿Qué te ha pasado? Estabas de bastante buen humor cuando me escribiste.

—Oh, nada en particular. El mundo empezó a parecerme sórdido, una especie de jardín de calabazas, con todas las calabazas cortadas. Una enfermedad típica del genio, puedes estar seguro —dijo Hans, contrayendo la cara en una sonrisa—; y de hecho, me cansé de ser virtuoso sin recompensa, especialmente con este calor de Londres.

—¿Nada más? ¿Ninguna contrariedad de verdad? —dijo Deronda.

Hans sacudió la cabeza.

—Yo vine a contarte mis propios asuntos, pero no puedo hacerlo sinceramente si tú ocultas los tuyos.

—No he tenido ningún asunto en el mundo —dijo Hans, de una forma atolondrada—, salvo una pelea con un hombre que vendía baratijas. Además, como es la primera vez en nuestras vidas que vienes a hablarme de tus propios asuntos, solo estás empezando a pagar una larga deuda.

Deronda estaba convencido que Hans actuaba de forma ficticia, pero confiaba en que recuperara su antigua franqueza poco a poco si él le contaba sus confidencias.

—Te reíste del misterio de mi viaje a Italia, Hans —empezó—. El motivo era un objeto que tocaba mi felicidad en sus mismas raíces. Yo no he sabido

nunca nada de mis padres, y fui a Génova en realidad para encontrarme con mi madre. Mi padre lleva mucho tiempo muerto, murió cuando yo era un bebé. Mi madre fue la hija de un eminente judío; mi padre era su primo. Pasaron varias cosas que me hicieron pensar en este origen casi como algo probable antes de que partiera. Estaba tan preparado para el resultado que me alegré de él, me alegré de descubrir que era judío.

—No debes esperar sorprenderme, Deronda —dijo Hans, que había cambiado de actitud, cruzando las piernas y examinando el talón de su zapatilla.

—¿Ya lo sabías?

—Me lo dijo mi madre. Fue a la casa la mañana siguiente que habías estado allí y los dos hermanos se lo dijeron. Puedes imaginar que nosotros no nos podemos alegrar tanto como ellos. Pero cualquier cosa que te haga feliz, a mí me acabará haciendo feliz también; exactamente *cuándo*, no lo puedo predecir —dijo Hans, hablando en voz baja, lo cual era tan normal en él como estar de mal humor por su suerte, pero aún así no iba a quejarse en absoluto.

—Entiendo bastante que no puedas compartir mi sentimiento —dijo Deronda—; pero no podía dejar que el silencio se interpusiera entre nosotros en algo que ha arrojado una nueva luz sobre mi futuro. He recogido algunas de las ideas de Mardoqueo, y pretendo llevarlas a cabo, tanto como permita el esfuerzo de un hombre. Me atrevería a decir que de aquí a un tiempo viajaré al este y estaré fuera por unos años.

Hans no dijo nada, pero se levantó, cogió su paleta y comenzó a trabajar con su pincel, de pie ante su pintura y de espaldas a Deronda, que se sentía también, en esos momentos, incómodo por la incomodidad de Hans.

Al final, Hans dijo, hablando de nuevo en voz baja, y sin girarse:

—Perdona la pregunta, ¿pero sabe todo esto la señora Grandcourt?

—No; y tengo que rogarte, Hans —dijo Deronda, más bien enfadado—, que dejes de bromear sobre el tema. Cualquier noción que tengas está muy lejos de la realidad, es lo contrario de la realidad.

—No estoy más dispuesto a bromear que lo que estaré en mi propio funeral —dijo Hans—. Pero no estoy del todo seguro de que seas consciente de cuáles son mis nociones sobre el tema.

—Tal vez no —dijo Deronda—. Pero déjame decirte, de una vez por todas, que con relación a la señora Grandcourt, nunca he ocupado, ni nunca ocuparé la posición de pretendiente. Si alguna vez has pensado seriamente en eso por algo que has observado, estás completamente equivocado.

Hubo un silencio durante un breve instante, y para cada uno de los dos, el silencio era como un aire irritante, un malestar exagerado.

—Tal vez me haya equivocado en otra interpretación también —dijo Hans al final.

—¿En cuál?

—Que no tuvieras ninguna intención de ocupar la posición de pretendiente hacia otra mujer, alguien que no es ni esposa ni viuda.

—No puedo hacer ver que no te entiendo, Meyrick. Es muy doloroso que nuestros deseos colisionen. Espero que me digas si tienes algún motivo para suponer que tú serás el que triunfará.

—Eso parece una consulta más bien superflua por tu parte, Deronda —dijo Hans, con cierta irritación.

—¿Por qué superficial?

—Porque estás perfectamente convencido de tu triunfo, y probablemente has tenido la mejor evidencia para convencerte.

—Seré más franco contigo de lo que tú eres conmigo —dijo Deronda, todavía acalorado por el arrebato de Hans, pero aun así apenado por él—. Nunca he tenido la más ligera evidencia de que lo conseguiría. De hecho, tengo muy pocas esperanzas.

Hans miró rápidamente a su amigo dándose la vuelta, pero se volvió inmediatamente a su dibujo de nuevo.

—Y en nuestra situación presente —dijo Deronda, dolido por la idea de que Hans sospechara de su sinceridad, y dando un matiz de ofensa a sus palabras—: no veo cómo puedo darle a conocer deliberadamente mis sentimientos por ella. Si no pudiera devolverlos, habría amargado su comodidad, pues ni ella ni yo podríamos separarnos de su hermano, y tendríamos que encontrarnos continuamente. Si llegara a causarle ese tipo de pena al descubrir sin querer mis sentimientos, no sería mejor que un animal maligno.

—No creo que yo nunca haya revelado *mis* sentimientos por ella —dijo Hans, como si se estuviera reivindicando.

—Quieres decir que estamos al mismo nivel, entonces; no tienes motivos para envidiarme.

—Oh, ni lo más mínimo —dijo Hans, con amarga ironía—. Has medido mi presunción y sabes que rebasa todas tus ventajas.

—Soy un estorbo para ti, Meyrick. Lo siento, pero no puedo evitarlo —dijo Deronda, levantándose—. Después de lo que anteriormente pasó entre

nosotros, quería darte esta explicación; y no veo que ninguna pretensión mía haya significado alguna diferencia real para ti. Ni es probable que las haya para mí dadas las circunstancias actuales. Ahora que el padre está allí, ¿sabías que el padre está allí?

—Sí. Si no fuera un judío, me permitiría maldecirlo… con vagos elogios, me refiero —dijo Hans, pero sin una sonrisa en su boca.

—Ella y yo nos vemos más frenados que nunca. Las cosas pueden seguir así por dos años sin averiguar nada de sus sentimientos hacia mí. Así es como están las cosas, Hans. Ni tú ni yo nos hemos hecho daño el uno al otro, por lo que veo. Debemos poner fin a esta especie de rivalidad en una esperanza que probablemente no conduzca a nada. Nuestra amistad puede soportar ese esfuerzo, seguro.

—No, no puede —dijo Hans con ímpetu, lanzando sus bártulos, llevándose las manos a los bolsillos de su chaqueta, y girándose para encarar a Deronda, que retrocedió un poco y le miró sorprendido. Hans continuó en el mismo tono:

—Nuestra amistad, mi amistad, no puede soportar el esfuerzo de comportarse contigo como un cobarde desagradecido que envidia tu felicidad. Pues *tú* eres el perro más dichoso del mundo. Si Mirah quiere a alguien más que a su hermano, *tú eres ese hombre*.

Hans dio media vuelta y se dejó caer en su silla, mirando a Deronda con una expresión que era todo lo contrario a la ternura. Algo así como una descarga pasó por Deronda, y tras un instante, dijo:

—Una invención tuya muy graciosa, Hans.

—No estoy de buen humor. Te aseguro que encontré el hecho muy desagradable cuando se me reveló, tanto más, o tal vez tanto menos, porque creía que tu corazón se debía a la duquesa. Pero ahora, ¡maldito seas! Resultas estar enamorado, tú, un judío, que reúnes todas las condiciones para ser el elegido.

—Dime lo que te convenció de ello, eres un buen chico —dijo Deronda, desconfiando de la agradable sensación a la que no estaba acostumbrado.

—No me lo preguntes. Mi madrecita fue testigo. El resultado es que Mirah está celosa de la duquesa, y cuanto antes le digas lo que sientes mejor. ¡Ya ves! He despejado tus dudas y ya puedo maldecirte por darte lo que mereces, que es la mayor suerte que has podido tener.

—¡Dios te bendiga, Hans! —dijo Deronda, ofreciéndole la mano, que el otro cogió y la apretó fuertemente en silencio.

Capítulo 68

> Todos los pensamientos, pasiones y deleites,
> cualquiera de las cosas que remueva esta estructura mortal
> no son más que ministros del Amor,
> y alimentan su llama sagrada.
>
> COLERIDGE[310]

LAS ANSIAS DE DERONDA POR CONFESAR SU AMOR NO PODÍAN HABER ENCONTRADO un estímulo más potente que el que le había dado Hans al asegurarle que Mirah necesitaba que le despejase sus celos. Fue a su siguiente visita a Esdras con la firme determinación de aprovechar —no, incluso mejor, de pedir— una oportunidad para hablar en privado con ella. Si aceptaba su amor, se sentía con valor para afrontar todas las consecuencias, y como prometido de ella ganaría una autoridad protectora que sería una defensa deseable para sus futuras dificultades con su padre. Deronda no había observado ningún signo de inquietud creciente en Lapidtoh, o de relajación en su deseo de causar una buena impresión; pero tenía el presentimiento de que se produciría cierta lucha en el futuro, alguna mortificación, o un aumento intolerable del malestar doméstico de los que tendría que librar a Esdras y a Mirah, como víctimas impotentes.

Sus presentimientos habrían aumentado si hubiera conocido lo que pasaba por la mente del padre.

Toda esa inquietud, esa atención divagante, que torturaba a Esdras, era para Lapidoth una engorrosa sumisión, y solo la soportaba porque pensaba que era un medio para conseguir más tarde o más temprano una libertad en buenas condiciones. Empezó con la intención de esperar una buena oportunidad, tal como una ocasión para conseguir una suma considerable de Deronda; pero mientras lo observaba todo con curiosidad, e intentaba descubrir dónde ponía Mirah su dinero y sus llaves. La necesidad imperiosa que tenía de apostar, que arrastraba su actividad a cualquier otra ocupación, y tejía una red en su imaginación que enmarañaba todo lo demás, difícilmente podría haberse controlado por un propósito firme, sobre todo si se hubiera presentado la oportunidad de poner sus manos en alguna cantidad que mereciera la pena. Pero Mirah, con su clarividencia práctica, se cuidó de no

romper la promesa que había hecho a Esdras, escondiendo todo el dinero, excepto lo que necesitaba a corto plazo, para cuidar de la señora Meyrick, y Lapidoth se sentía ante una irritante falta de provisiones, como si estuviera en un manicomio donde todo lo apartaban de su vista. Haber abierto un cajón del tocador de Mirah, y quedarse con los cheques que encontrara, lo habría considerado como una especie de apropiación doméstica, y no se habría sentido culpable por ello; los grados de libertad que se concede un hombre con la propiedad de los demás suelen ampliarse sin problemas, incluso más allá del límite en el que la ley comienza a imponerse —por eso es más seguro invertir en cucharas que en acciones mineras—. Lapidtoh se sentía realmente tratado de forma ofensiva por su hija, y pensó que debería conseguir lo que quisiese con el dinero que ganaba su hija y no solo disfrutar de sus tartas de manzana. Pero permaneció sumiso; ciertamente, la indiscreción que más le tentaba no era insistir a Mirah, sino atraer el interés de Deronda. Las personas astutas, cuando no tienen nada más que ofrecer, ponen precio a su retirada, y la dificultad con la que se encontraba Lapidoth para conseguir más cosas le hizo pensar que su familia estaría más a gusto sin él, y que Deronda estaría dispuesto a entregarle una considerable suma de dinero por sacárselo de encima. Pero a pesar de estar versado en actuar con descaro, a Lapidoth todavía le imponía la presencia del amigo de Esdras, y retrasó su propósito indefinidamente.

Ese día, en que Deronda llegó lleno de conciencia regocijada, que se mostraba inevitablemente en su porte y en su conversación, Lapidoth estaba en su punto máximo de descontento y añoranza, que le tenían ocupado forjando salidas posibles, y la nueva alegría de Deronda las estimularon aún más. Esta preocupación fue finalmente tan fuerte que interfirió con su interés habitual por lo que ocurría en la casa, y en su insistencia en sentarse incluso cuando releían cosas que no podía seguir. Tras sentarse un rato, salió fuera a fumar y a dar un paseo por la plaza, y los dos amigos se encontraron más a sus anchas. Mirah no estaba en casa, pero era seguro que volvería antes de que Deronda se fuese, y sus ojos brillaron con un anticipo secreto: pensaba que cuando la viera de nuevo vería cierta dulzura que reconocería como reservada para él, y que antes sus ojos habían estado sellados para darse cuenta. Mostró un cariñoso afecto adicional hacia Esdras.

—Esta pequeña habitación es demasiado estrecha para ti, Esdras —dijo, interrumpiendo su lectura—. El acaloramiento semanal que acumulamos aquí es peor que el calor de Génova, donde uno se sienta a la sombra fresca de

amplias habitaciones. Tienes que ir a una casa mejor enseguida. Haré lo que quiera contigo, pues soy la parte más fuerte. —Sonrió a Esdras, que dijo:

—No me siento oprimido por nada salvo por la respiración. Pero tú, que deberías estar en un palacio espacioso, encontrarás esto una prisión estrecha. Sin embargo, no puedo decirte: «Vete».

—Oh, el campo sería para mí un castigo mientras estés aquí —dijo Deronda, levantándose y paseando por la doble habitación, que no ofrecía, sin embargo, más que un paseo muy corto, mientras hacía un gran abanico con su pañuelo—. Esta es la sala del mundo más feliz. Además, me imagino estar en el este, pues me estoy preparando para ir allí algún día. Solo que no llevaré una corbata ni un anillo gordo allí —añadió con énfasis, haciendo una pausa para quitarse esos elementos superficiales y dejarlos sobre una pequeña mesa que había detrás de Esdras, que tenía la mesa de enfrente suyo cubierta de libros y papeles.

—He estado llevando mi anillo memorable desde que llegué a casa —continuó, mientras volvía a sentarse—. Pero soy tan sibarita que me supone una carga y me lo quito cuando estoy haciendo algo. Entiendo por qué los romanos tenían anillos de verano, si es que tenían. En fin, será mejor que continúe.

Pronto estuvieron de nuevo absortos por su trabajo. Deronda leía un fragmento rabínico hebreo bajo las correcciones y comentarios de Esdras, y no hicieron mucho caso cuando Lapidoth volvió a entrar y se sentó en algún sitio por detrás.

Sus ojos divagadores aterrizaron enseguida en el anillo que brillaba en la pieza de caoba oscura. En su paseo, había estado pesando en la quimera de una oportunidad ventajosa en el extranjero, que solo requería cierta cantidad de dinero en efectivo, que si comunicaba en privado a Deronda, este podría preguntarle por la cantidad requerida: y era esta parte de su historia la que Lapidoth encontraba más discutible, pues había un peligro en pedir demasiado, pero también podía luego lamentarse de haberse quedado corto. Si por él fuera no habría puesto un límite, pero no tenía ni idea de cuál sería el límite de Deronda. Pero ahora, en medio de estas cavilaciones preparatorias para una acogida que permanecía indefinida, este anillo, que ya había suscitado la envidia de Lapidoth al verlo puesto en el dedo de Deronda, brilló de repente en solitario y a tiro de piedra. Su valor estaba ciertamente por debajo de las más pequeñas cantidades imaginarias que había barajado en su propósito; pero estaba allí como algo sólido, y su deseo saltó rápido al

pensamiento (todavía no a la intención) de que si llegara a apropiarse de ese anillo y salir fuera, dispondría de los medios de una huida fácil de sus restricciones actuales, sin problemas, y sin peligros; pues cualquier pertenencia de Deronda (disponible sin su consentimiento formal) era parte de la propiedad de sus hijos, pues nunca llevarían a juicio a su padre por recuperarla. Los detalles de este pensamiento se siguieron tan rápidos unos de otros que parecieron conformar ante él una sola imagen. Lapidoth nunca había realizado un hurto; pero el hurto es una forma de apropiación por la que la gente es castigada por la ley; y, quedarse con este anillo de un pariente virtual, que gustosamente le habría hecho un regalo más sustancial, no lo consideraba dentro de la categoría de hurto. Con todo, Lapidoth prefería el regalo más sustancial, pero hacía falta darse prisa en pedirlo, y rechazar la idea de imaginarse cogiendo el anillo, aunque esta no dejaba de repetirse como una tonadilla interior. Para satisfacer ese deseo decidió ir abajo, y esperar a que Deronda se marchara, momento que aprovecharía para acompañarlo en su paseo y llevar a cabo descaradamente su meditado plan. Se levantó y se detuvo a mirar desde la ventana, pero al mismo tiempo vio lo que quedaba ante él: el breve camino que tenía que tomar hasta llegar a la puerta, muy cerca de donde estaba el anillo. Sin embargo, estaba decidido a bajar abajo; pero —sin cambiar su resolución, sino más bien por la dominación del deseo— resultó que al pasar al lado de la mesa, sus dedos cayeron sin hacer ruido sobre el anillo, y se encontró en el pasillo con el anillo en su mano. Luego se puso el sombrero y abandonó la casa. La posibilidad de aprovecharse otra vez de sus hijos la veía ya muy lejana, y antes de salir de la plaza su sensación de apresuramiento le hizo concentrarse en vender el anillo y embarcar al extranjero.

Deronda y Esdras le vieron salir; pero eso fue todo. Pero, al cabo de un rato, entró Mirah y les interrumpió de verdad. No se sacó su sombrero; y cuando Deronda se levantó a saludarla ofreciéndole la mano, ella dijo, en un estado inexplicado y embarazoso de azoramiento:

—Solo he entrado para traer a Esdras su nueva medicina. Tengo que ir directamente a casa de la señora Meyrick a buscar una cosa.

—Permítame que la acompañe —dijo Deronda imperativamente—. No debo cansar más a Esdras; además, mi cerebro se está derritiendo. Yo también quiero ir a casa de la señora Meyrick; ¿puedo acompañarla?

—Oh, sí —dijo Mirah, enrojeciendo aún más, con la vaga sensación de que había algo nuevo en Deronda, y volviéndose para preparar la medicina de

Esdras; este, mientras tanto, echó hacia atrás la cabeza con los ojos cerrados, incapaz de apartar de su mente las ideas que habían aflorado mientras habían estado leyendo. Deronda, por un momento, se quedó de pie sin pensar en nada más que el paseo, hasta que Mirah se volvió de nuevo y trajo la medicina, cuando se acordó de repente que había dejado aparte su corbata, y dijo—: Le ruego disculpe que no lleve la corbata, no era mi intención que me viera así —se fue a la mesita, cogió la corbata, y exclamó con un violento gesto de sorpresa—: Santo cielo, ¿dónde ha ido mi anillo? —y empezó a buscarlo por el suelo.

Esdras miró al lado de su silla. Mirah, rápida como el pensamiento, fue al lugar donde Deronda lo buscaba, y dijo:

—¿Lo puso aquí?

—Sí —dijo Deronda, que todavía no encontraba más explicación que el que se hubiera caído el anillo y estuviera oculto en las sombras, sin poder distinguirlo de la alfombra abigarrada. Iba apartando todos los muebles de alrededor, buscando en todos los sitios posibles e imposibles con las manos y los ojos.

Pero a Mirah sí se le había ocurrido otra explicación, que le quitó el color de sus mejillas. Fue hasta el oído de Esdras y le susurró:

—¿Estaba aquí mi padre?

Esdras asintió con la cabeza a modo de respuesta, fijando en ella los ojos con terrible entendimiento. Se dirigió como una flecha hacia el lugar donde Deronda todavía tenía puestos los ojos en esa exploración desesperada que seguimos haciendo cuando hemos examinado un lugar en vano.

—¿No lo encuentra? —dijo apresuradamente.

Él, tropezándose con su mirada asustada, captó inmediatamente la alarma y respondió:

—Tal vez me lo puse en el bolsillo —pretendiendo hacer ver que estaba allí.

Ella le observó y dijo:

—¿No está allí? Lo puso en la mesa —con una voz penetrante que no le dejaba fingir que lo había encontrado en su bolsillo; e inmediatamente salió de la habitación.

Deronda la siguió —había ido a la sala de estar de abajo a por su padre—, abrió la puerta del dormitorio para ver si estaba allí, miró el sitio donde solía colgar su sombrero, y se volvió con las manos juntas y los labios pálidos, mirando desesperadamente a través de la ventana. Luego levantó la vista

hacia Deronda, que no se había atrevido a decirle nada al verla tan agitada. Ella le miró, incapaz de pronunciar una palabra —la mirada parecía una aceptación tácita de la humillación que sentía en su presencia. Pero él, tomando sus dos manos entre las suyas, dijo en un tono de reverente adoración:

—Mirah, déjame pensar que es mi padre tanto como el tuyo, que nuestras penas, desgracias y alegrías no son independientes. Preferiría aceptar como mía tu pena que compartir la mayor alegría de cualquier otra mujer. Dime que no me rechazarás, dime que me llevarás contigo para compartirlo todo. Dime que me prometerás ser mi mujer, dímelo ahora. He albergado dudas durante tanto tiempo… he tenido que esconder mi amor tanto tiempo. Dilo ahora y te mostraré siempre que te amo con amor eterno.

Mirah había ido cambiando gradualmente. No había pasado de repente de la angustia a la plena y bendita consciencia de que, en este momento de pena y vergüenza, Deronda estaba ofreciéndole el mayor tributo que puede ofrecer un hombre a una mujer. En los primeros tonos y las primeras palabras, solo encontró un solemne consuelo, atribuyendo la bondad de Deronda a sus sentimientos por su hermano. Pero poco a poco, un éxtasis inesperado que le aseguraba la felicidad fue tomando posesión en ella: su rostro brillaba bajo el de Deronda mientras él se inclinaba hacia ella; de todas formas, le miraba todavía con gran seriedad, como cuando había reconocido por primera vez con religiosa gratitud que él la había considerado «digna de lo mejor»; y cuando terminó, no pudo decir nada, solo elevó sus labios hacia los de él y los besó, como si ese fuera el simple «sí». Se quedaron de pie, mirándose el uno al otro, él con sus manos entre las de ella, demasiado feliz para moverse, tan unidos en su nueva consciencia que todos los demás signos parecían haberse alejado, hasta que Mirah dijo en un susurro:

—Vayamos a consolar a Esdras.

Capítulo 69

> La naturaleza humana a la que me sentía pertenecer,
> y que reverenciaba con amor,
> no era una presencia puntual, sino un espíritu
> difundido a través del tiempo y del espacio,
> gracias a la evidencia de los monumentos, rectos,
> postrados, o inclinados hacia su lugar de reposo:
> la tierra, las sublimes ruinas esparcidas
> de las naciones desparecidas.
>
> WORDSWORTH, *El Preludio*[311]

SIR HUGO LLEVÓ A CABO SU PLAN DE PASAR PARTE DEL OTOÑO EN DIPLOW, Y PARA principios de octubre su presencia contribuyó a alegrar la vida al vecindario, a todas las personas y rangos afectados, desde las casas señoriales de Brackenshaw y Quetcham a las tiendas de Wanchester, donde se fraguaban todos los cotilleos. Pues Sir Hugo era un hombre que le gustaba ser afable y mostrarse tal como era, un Liberal de buen linaje, que confiaba completamente en la reforma ya que no significaba ninguna diferencia esencial en las costumbres inglesas en cuanto a los sentimientos, uno de los cuales es, sin duda, el gusto por considerar la sociedad bien estructurada y adornada con rangos hereditarios. Por eso, hizo de Diplow una casa de lo más agradable, y extendió sus invitaciones desde los viejos procuradores de Wanchester a los jóvenes clérigos de los pueblos, pero cuidando también la combinación de invitados, sin alimentar a todo el ganado junto, para que evitaran pensar que no se les hacía un cumplido especial. Al despreocupado Lord Brackenshaw, por ejemplo, no le importaba pasar el rato con Robinson el procurador, pero este se habría sentido naturalmente molesto si se le hubiera pedido que pasara el rato con un grupo de gente que pasaran por su mismo rango. Sir Hugo estaba lo suficientemente bien informado sobre todos estos puntos para ganar popularidad y satisfacer a los demás —dos resultados que eminentemente se acomodaban a su grandeza—. El rector de Pennicote encontraba ahora que le recibían en Diplow de forma muy diferente a la altiva tolerancia que había sufrido durante el reinado de Grandcourt. No es que al baronet le cayera bien el señor Gascoigne; era porque deseaba mantener una marcada relación de amistad con él a causa de la señora Grandcourt, para la

que su caballerosidad se había comprometido cada vez más. ¿Por qué? La razón principal era tal que no podía comunicarla plenamente, ni siguiera a Lady Mallinger —pues nunca diría lo que pensaba que era el secreto de una mujer a otra, ni aunque la otra fuera su mujer—, lo que muestra que su caballerosidad incluía una rara reticencia.

Deronda, tras comprometerse con Mirah, creyó que era su deber hacer una declaración completa de su posición y sus propósitos a Sir Hugo, y decidió hacerlo por carta. Tenía más que el presentimiento que su paternal amigo sentiría cierto descontento, si no dolor, ante este giro de los acontecimientos. El hecho de leer noticias no deseadas, en lugar de escucharlas, tiene la ventaja de que uno se evita mostrar una repentina expresión de impaciencia de la que más tarde se puede arrepentir. Deronda temía esa colisión verbal que convierte al sentimiento disculpable en algo ofensivo por mucho tiempo.

Y a Sir Hugo, aunque no le sorprendió demasiado, sí le disgustó completamente. Su respuesta inmediata iba a ser la de mostrar la carta a Lady Mallinger, que expresaría con toda seguridad un asombro contra el cual su marido podría discutir como irrazonable, y así dividiría la tensión de su disgusto. Y, de hecho, cuando ella se mostrara asombrada y afligida porque todos los maravillosos talentos de Daniel, y el consuelo de tenerlo en la casa, hubieran acabado con su locura sobre los judíos, el baronet podría decirle:

—¡No digas tonterías, querida! Después de todo, Dan no hará el ridículo. Tiene grandes nociones sobre el judaísmo, visiones políticas que tú no puedes entender. No temas, que Dan sabrá mantener bien alta su cabeza.

Pero con respecto a la boda en perspectiva, no le proporcionó materia para discutir. La amable señora observó, sin rencor, que poco se había imaginado lo que sucedería cuando invitó a Mirah a cantar en su fiesta musical y dar lecciones a Amabel. Tras algún titubeo, de hecho, confesó que había pasado por su mente que después de un tiempo razonable Daniel se casaría con la señora Grandcourt —ya que parecía tan excepcional que ella se hallara en Génova justo en ese tiempo—, y aunque ella misma no era muy partidaria de las viudas, no podía evitar pensar que un matrimonio así habría sido mejor que ir con los judíos. Pero Sir Hugo compartía tanto esa opinión que no pudo corregir como error femenino; y no pudo desfogarse de su mal humor por la refutación de sus desagradables conclusiones con respecto a Gwendolen. No quería que Lady Mallinger pronunciara una sola palabra más sobre el asunto, diciéndose a sí mismo: «Si esto le va a dolor a la pobrecilla» (refiriéndose a Gwendolen), «dado su estado nervioso actual, cuanto más tarde en enterarse

mejor. Y se lo tomará mejor si se entera por el mismo Dan». Las conjeturas de Sir Hugo estaban tan bien fundadas con el conocimiento que tenía, que creía estar totalmente informado de todo el asunto.

Mientras tanto, su estancia con su familia en Diplow le permitió continuar sus atenciones paternales hacia Gwendolen; y en esto, Lady Mallinger, a pesar de su poca preferencia por las viudas, le secundó gustosamente.

El plan del traslado a Offendene había sido llevado a cabo; y Gwendolen, al establecerse allí, mantuvo la calma más allá de las expectativas de su madre. Estaba experimentando parte de esa melancolía pacífica que llega de la renuncia de sí misma, y de acoger el bien ordinario de la existencia, especialmente la amabilidad, incluso de un perro, como un regalo no esperado. ¿Acaso alguien que ha estado perdido en la oscuridad se queja del aire dulce y de la luz del día? Hay una forma de mirar nuestra vida cada día como un escape y tomarse el retorno tranquilo del amanecer y de la noche —y aún más los sentimientos puros de las personas que brillan como estrellas, cuyo impulso generoso irrumpe en nuestra oscuridad interior— como una salvación que nos reconcilia con nuestras penalidades. Aquellos cuyo conocimiento de sí mismo les lleva a un estado de autoacusación como el de Hamlet pueden comprender esta sensación habitual de liberación. Y era lo que sentía Gwendolen mientras revivía una y otra vez la terrible historia de sus tentaciones, desde su primera forma de complacencia ilusoria cuando trataba de apartar cualquier signo de la conciencia, hasta la última, un odio apasionado que la arrastraba hacia su satisfacción, a la vez que rezaba y clamaba por recuperar la ayuda de esa conciencia que una vez abandonó. Meditaba ahora cada una de las palabras de Deronda que la libraron de lo peor de ella misma, y de lo peor que podía infligir en los demás, y en cada una de las palabras que llevaba en sí la fuerza para resistir la desesperación.

Pero la sostenía también la perspectiva de verle pronto de nuevo: ella no se lo imaginaba más que teniéndolo siempre a su alcance; su necesidad suprema de él no le dejaba ver que él llevaba su propia vida, y se imaginaba que toda su vida giraba en torno a ella —cosa que no ocurría solo a Gwendolen, pues todos nosotros podemos caer en esta forma de egoísmo pasional, no solo en nuestras relaciones con los demás, sino incluso con Dios —. Y el futuro que estaba encarando con optimismo era el de intentar llegar a ser lo que él le fuera indicando. ¿No se había presentado él la primera vez como una presencia correctiva que al principio ella había reconocido con resentimientos, y al final con un amor y una confianza plenos? No se podía

imaginar que se acabara de repente esa confianza, la cual era para ella como la firmeza de la tierra, él único apoyo en su camino.

Y Deronda no tardó en llegar a Diplow, que estaba a una distancia más apropiada desde la ciudad que la Abadía. Habría querido llevar a cabo el plan de llevarse a Esdras y a Mirah a un lugar más suave en la costa, mientras preparaba otro hogar donde Mirah pudiera entrar como su prometida, y donde juntos pudieran cuidar de su hermano. Pero Esdras rogó que no les trasladaran, a menos que fuera para ir con ellos al este. Todas las solicitaciones externas eran cada vez una carga más grande para él; pero pensaba con júbilo en la posibilidad de este viaje. Deronda, en sus preparativos para la boda, que esperaba no se demorase más de un par de meses, quería consultar a Sir Hugo, como solía hacer con todos sus recursos y asuntos, lo cual era una razón para no retrasar su visita a Diplow. Pero también había otra razón: su promesa a Gwendolen. La sensación de felicidad en su propio futuro estaba todavía empeñada con una ansiedad dolorosa en su corazón: esto puede parecer paradójico, pues siempre se considera feliz al amante amado, y la felicidad suele mostrar una gran indiferencia por la pena externa a ella. Pero la experiencia humana es a menudo paradójica, si por ello se entiende incongruente con las frases de las conversaciones en curso o de las filosofías actuales. Que su alegría por Mirah no fuera incompatible con su preocupación por otra mujer, no era una traición hacia Mirah, sino una parte de esa naturaleza tan llena que hacía que su amor por ella fuera aún más valioso. Pues, ¿qué es el amor mismo para la persona que más amamos? Una envolvente de la preocupación inconmensurable que aún así es mejor que cualquier alegría que sintamos fuera de nuestro amor.

Deronda vino dos veces a Diplow; y vio a Gwendolen dos veces, y aun así volvió a la ciudad sin haberle dicho nada sobre el cambio de su vida y sus proyectos. Se culpaba a sí mismo; pero siempre que pretendemos comunicar algo trascendental que probablemente producirá dolor en el otro, sentimos que dependemos de cierta preparación en las palabras o en las imágenes, cierta concordancia entre el estado de ánimo del otro con el posible efecto de lo que tenemos que comunicar. En la primera entrevista Gwendolen estaba tan absorta por lo que tenía que decirle, tan llena de preguntas que él debía contestar, sobre la configuración de su vida, lo que podría hacer para ser menos ignorante, cómo podría ser más amable con todo el mundo, y enmendar su egoísmo y tratar de librarse de él, que Deronda desistió completamente de interrumpir las necesidades inmediatas de ella y hablar de

él, y aún más, de infringir en ella una herida en esos momentos en los que se apoyaba en él buscando ayuda en su camino. En la segunda entrevista, a la que vino con una renovada determinación de dirigir la conversación hacia un camino preparatorio, la encontró en un estado de depresión profunda, dominada por ciertos recuerdos desagradables y miserables que se presentaron como más reales y más amplios que cualquier intención nueva sobre la que pudiera basar su futuro. Lloró de forma histérica, y dijo que él siempre la despreciaría. Él solo pudo encontrar palabras de consuelo y ánimo: y cuando poco a poco la reanimaron, con esa mirada patética de nuevo interés infantil que vemos en los ojos donde todavía brillan las lágrimas, era imposible preocuparla con una nueva carga.

Pero el tiempo pasaba, y le presionaba el difícil deber de poner fin a la situación. Gwendolen, era cierto, nunca pensó que él pudiera tener sus propios problemas; y nunca se le había ocurrido preguntarle por qué había ido a Génova. Pero esta ignorancia implicaba que la revelación repentina de los acontecimientos sería un golpe aún más duro para ella; y si dejaba que la revelación la hicieran personas indiferentes, ella sentiría que él la había tratado con cruel desconsideración. No podía comunicárselo por escrito: su ternura no podía soportar pensar que ella leería su despedida implícita en soledad, y tal vez viendo sus palabras cargadas de alegría para él y de indiferencia hacia ella. Bajó de nuevo a Diplow, pensando que afrontaría cualquier peligro con tal de no marchar sin seguir manteniéndola en la ignorancia.

En esta tercera visita Deronda encontró a Hans Meyrick instalado con su caballete en Diplow, comenzando su cuadro de las tres hijas sentadas en un banco, al «estilo Gainsborough»[312], queriendo variar su trabajo paseando por Pennicote para hacer esbozos de los niños del pueblo y trabar más conocimiento con los Gascoigne. Hans parecía haber recobrado su vivacidad, pero Deronda detectó cierto fingimiento, igual que detectamos lo artificial del resplandor de una dama por sus tonos un poco elevados y su firme persistencia (un «Rojo Fluctuante» del que todavía no se había hecho publicidad). Junto con toda su amistad agradecida y su admiración por Deronda, Hans no podía evitar sentir cierta irritación contra él, como las que las naturalezas abiertas y extremadamente imprudentes suelen sentir cuando un amigo, al poner fin a su reserva, revela un estado de cosas no solo insospechado, sino que es lo contrario de lo que ingeniosamente se había esperado y calculado. Es cierto que el pobre Hans siempre había confiado

principalmente en Deronda, y no habría sentído mucha curiosidad por cualquier confidencia que este le hubiese contado a cambio; pero ¿quién de los que airean sus asuntos no es tentado de considerar cualquier insinuación sobre los asuntos de sus amigos como una irrelevancia ególatra? Ese no era motivo para que no le doliera a Hans que mientras él había abierto ingenuamente su corazón sobre Mirah, Deronda había mantenido en secreto una rivalidad que ahora se revelaba como el factor determinante. Además, siempre está el peligro de que nuestros amigos acaben siendo algo más de lo que éramos conscientes. Hay que excusar a Hans por estos arrebatos de sensibilidad dolida, pues no les permitió que afectaran en gran medida a su conducta: tenía la conciencia tranquila de haber hecho lo correcto hacia su afortunado amigo; o, como se dijo a sí mismo, «su metal había producido un sonido mejor de lo que habría jurado de antemano». Pues Hans siempre había mantenido que desde el punto de vista de la virtud, era un *dilettante*: lo que significaba que le agradaba verla en los demás, pero que si se mezclaba con él, no le quedaba nada bien. Tal vez como recompensa por su buena conducta se permitió más libertad en su lenguaje; y al pensar que Deronda era plenamente feliz no se le ocurrió pensar qué pasaba con sus sentimientos hacia Gwendolen, por lo que habló de ella sin titubeos.

—¿Cuándo bajaste al pueblo, Hans? —dijo Deronda, uniéndose a él en el patio donde estaba haciendo un estudio de las condiciones del banco y de los árboles.

—Oh, hace diez días; antes de lo que dijo Sir Hugo. Fui con Rex Gascoigne y me quedé en la Rectoría un día o dos. Estoy al día con todo el cotilleo de esta zona; conozco lo que piensa el carretero, y he ayudado en los exámenes de la escuela infantil. La hermana Anna, que tiene unos labios tan bonitos, me escoltó; si no, habría sido atacado por tres pilluelos y un idiota, a causa de mi pelo largo y mi aspecto general que se aparta del tipo de belleza que entienden en Pennicote. En conjunto, el pueblo es idílico. Su único defecto es un cura oscuro de cuerpo ancho que tendría que haberse dedicado a lavar gruesos cortinajes. Los Gascoigne son perfectos, además de estar relacionados con la duquesa Vandyke. La vi por casualidad con sus ropas negras a lo lejos, aunque no aparece ante las visitas.

—¿No está viviendo en la rectoría? —dijo Deronda.

—No; pero me llevaron a Offendene para ver la antigua casa, por lo que vi a la familia de la duquesa. Me imagino que habrás estado allí y lo sabrás ya todo sobre ellas.

—Sí, he estado allí —dijo Deronda tranquilamente.

—Un viejo sitio magnífico. Representa una estancia excelente para una viuda con andanzas románticas. Y parece haber tenido varios romances. Creo que he descubierto que hubo uno entre ella y mi amigo Rex.

—¿No mucho antes de su boda, entonces? —dijo Deronda, realmente interesado—, pues solo estuvieron un año en Offendene. ¿Cómo llegaste a saberlo?

—Oh, no ignoro lo que es ser un pobre diablo, y he aprendido a sentir una satisfacción oculta por las desgracias de los demás. Descubrí que Rex nunca va a Offendene, y no ha visto a la duquesa desde que regresó; y la señorita Gascoigne dejó caer algo en nuestra charla acerca de una actuación mímica, y comencé a hacer algunas de mis tonterías para hacer reír a los más jóvenes, algo que me demostró que Rex había rondado una vez lo suficientemente cerca de su bella prima como para salir chamuscado. No sé cuál fue su parte en el asunto. Tal vez vino el duque y se la llevó. Eso es lo que pasa siempre cuando un joven que de verdad vale la pena fija sus afectos. Ahora comprendo por qué Gascoigne habla de hacer de la ley su señora y de permanecer soltero. Pero esto son afirmaciones en caliente. Como el duque no se ahogó para que te beneficiaras tú, puede que fuera para que se beneficiara Rex. ¿Quién sabe?

—¿Es absolutamente necesario que la señora Grandcourt se case otra vez? —dijo Deronda, dispuesto a añadir que, aunque Hans hubiera sido capaz de reconstruir sus andanzas hasta aquí, eso no le garantizaba adivinar el futuro.

—¡Eres un monstruo! —replicó Hans—, ¿quieres que ella beba los vientos por ti toda su vida, que se queme como Sati[313] mientras tú sigues vivo y feliz?

Deronda no podía decir nada, paro parecía tan molesto que Hans cambió el tema de la conversación, y cuando estuvo solo se encogió de hombros y pensó que realmente había habido un sentimiento más fuerte entre Deronda y la duquesa de lo que Mirah querría saber. «¿Por qué no se enamoró de mí?», pensó Hans, riéndose de sí mismo. «No habría tenido rivales. Nunca una mujer quiso discutir teología conmigo».

No es de extrañar que a Deronda le sentara tan mal este tipo de bromas. Tocaban susceptibilidades que todavía estaban vivas y atemorizadas ante la posibilidad de afrontar cierto dolor al que incluso las palabras ligeras de Hans parecían añadir más realismo: un tipo de reconocimiento dado por otro que además realzaba el tema de nuestra ansiedad. Y ahora había bajado al pueblo

con la firme determinación de no evadir de nuevo la prueba. Al día siguiente cabalgó hasta Offendene. Había anunciado su visita y había pedido si Gwendolen pudiese recibirla; y la encontró esperándole en la antigua sala de estar en la que habían sucedido diversas crisis de su vida. Parecía menos triste de lo que la había visto desde que murió su marido; no había una sonrisa en su rostro, sino un plácido control de sí misma, en contraste con el estado en el que la había encontrado la última vez. Se dio cuenta como nunca lo había hecho de la tristeza perceptible de Deronda; y tan pronto se hubieron sentado —él a poca distancia enfrente de ella—, dijo:

—Le daba miedo venir a verme, porque estaba tan llena de pena y desesperación la última vez. Pero hoy no lo estoy. Desde entonces que me arrepiento de ello. He hecho de esto la razón por la que debo mantener mi esperanza y mostrarme tan animada como pueda, porque no quiero causarle ninguna pena sobre mí.

Hubo una dulzura inusitada en el tono y en la mirada de Gwendolen mientras pronunciaba estas palabras que le hicieron tener a Deronda la sensación de que iba a infligir una crueldad extrema en la tarea que le había traído hasta allí. Pero se sintió obligado a elaborar su respuesta de forma que fuera ya un inicio de esa tarea.

—Me encuentro hoy ante un problema —dijo, mirándola más bien con tristeza—; pero es porque tengo que contarle cosas que usted considerará casi como una falta de confianza por mi parte no habérselas contado antes. Hay cosas que afectan a mi propia vida, a mi propio futuro. Le parecerá que no le he pagado bien la confianza que usted ha depositado en mí, no haberle dicho nunca nada de los hechos que producirán grandes cambios en mi vida. Pero cuando hemos estado juntos apenas hemos tenido tiempo de entrar en asuntos que en esos momentos eran menos acuciantes para mí que las pruebas por las que usted estaba pasando. —Había una especie de tímida ternura en los profundos tonos de Deronda, e hizo una pausa dirigiéndole una mirada suplicante, como si hubiera sido solo Gwendolen quien hubiera desvelado algo en sus escenas de solicitaciones y confesiones.

Se veía en ella una sensación de sorpresa. El sentido que encontró en sus palabras la conmocionó, pero sin causarle temor. Su mente pensó enseguida en algún cambio en su posición respecto a Sir Hugo y a la propiedad de Sir Hugo. Le respondió quitando importancia al hecho, como si Deronda no tuviera por qué pedirle perdón:

—Usted no pensó en nada más que lo que podía ayudarme; y yo me encontraba en una situación tan difícil: ¿cómo iba a contarme otras cosas?

—Tal vez le sorprenda —dijo Deronda—, que no haya sabido hasta hace poco quiénes eran mis padres.

Gwendolen no estaba sorprendida: estaba más segura que lo que esperaba oír era lo que pensaba. Deronda prosiguió sin reprimirse:

—La razón por la que me encontró en Italia fue porque había ido allí a saber… de hecho, a encontrarme con mi madre. Fue por deseo de ella que fui educado sin saber mi parentesco. Se separó de mí tras la muerte de mi padre, cuando era una pequeña criatura. Pero ahora está muy enferma, y se dio cuenta de que no debía mantener por más tiempo el secreto. Su principal motivo hasta entonces había sido que no quería que supiera que yo era judío.

—¡Un judío! —exclamó Gwendolen, en voz baja y asombrada, con una mirada de completa frustración, como si por sus venas corriera una poción embriagadora.

Deronda enrojeció sin decir nada más, mientras que Gwendolen, con los ojos fijos en el suelo, parecía perdida y luchaba por reencontrar su camino con ayuda de varios recuerdos. Al final pareció llegar a cierta conclusión, pues miró de nuevo a Deronda, manifestando su desacuerdo contra la conducta de la madre:

—¿Qué diferencia habría supuesto eso?

—A mí me ha supuesto una gran diferencia el saberlo —dijo Deronda, con énfasis; pero no pudo continuar con facilidad; la distancia entre las ideas de ella y las suyas era una barrera similar a la diferencia entre lenguas nativas, dejándole con la duda de la fuerza que le producirían a ella sus palabras.

Gwendolen se quedó meditando unos momentos más, y al final dijo sinceramente:

—Espero que no haya nada que le importe. Es usted el mismo que si no fuera judío.

Ella pretendía asegurarle que nada externo podía afectar su consideración hacia él o lo que él había influido en ella. Deronda pudo apoyarse en este malentendido.

—El descubrimiento no ha sido nada doloroso para mí —dijo—, me fui preparando gradualmente para ello, y me alegré cuando lo supe. Me había ido preparando gracias a la íntima amistad con un judío notable, cuyas ideas me sedujeron de tal forma que pienso dedicar la mejor parte de mi vida a esforzarme por llevarlas a cabo.

De nuevo Gwendolen parecía estremecida; apareció otra vez esa mirada de frustración, pero esta vez mezclada con inquietud. Observó a Deronda con los labios abiertos de modo infantil. No era que hubiera conectado sus palabras con Mirah y su hermano, sino que le habían hecho presentir un camino largo y montañoso para que su mente pudiera alcanzar la de Deronda. Las grandes ideas generales que ella le había atribuido no parecían que fuesen ya relevantes, no como lo eran estas ideas particulares misteriosas e insondables. Él no podía adivinar qué pasaba por su cabeza; solo podía buscar de llegar a su conclusión de la forma menos abrupta posible.

—Esto me va a llevar —dijo, tras una pausa—, a abandonar Inglaterra por un tiempo, por unos años. Tengo cosas que hacer por el este.

Aquí empezaba a aclararse algo, pero era de lo más intranquilizador. Los labios de Gwendolen empezaron a temblar.

—Pero ¿regresará? —dijo, probando el sabor de sus propias lágrimas mientras caían, sin que le diera tiempo a secárselas.

Deronda no pudo continuar sentado. Se levantó, y fue a situarse enfrente de la chimenea, para no estar cara a cara. Pero cuando ella se secó las mejillas con su pañuelo, se volvió y le miró, esperando una respuesta.

—Si vivo —dijo Deronda—, *algún día*.

Ambos estaban callados. Él no pudo convencerse de decirle más a menos que ella se lo preguntara; y ella aparentemente estaba meditando algo que tenía que decir.

—¿Qué es lo que va a hacer? —le preguntó, muy dulcemente—. ¿Soy capaz de entender esas ideas, o soy demasiado ignorante?

—Me voy al este para conocer mejor la condición de mi raza en varios de los países de allí —dijo Deronda, amablemente, ansioso por dejar claro todo lo posible esa parte impersonal de la separación entre ambos—. La idea que me obsesiona es recuperar una situación política para mi pueblo, convirtiéndolo de nuevo en una nación, dándole un centro nacional, como lo tiene el pueblo inglés, a pesar de estar tan esparcidos por toda la faz de la tierra. Es una tarea que se me presenta como un deber; estoy decidido a empezarla, aunque sea débilmente. Estoy decidido a dedicar mi vida a esto. Al menos, puedo desperar un sentimiento en otras mentes, como ha sido despertado en la mía.

Hubo un largo silencio entre ellos. El mundo se le hacía más grande a la pobre Gwendolen, y ella se hallaba más sola y desamparada en medio de él. El pensamiento de que pudiera volver tras su viaje por el este, quedó

aplastado por la visión desconcertante de estos objetivos tan amplios en los que ella quedaba reducida a una mera mota de polvo. Llega un momento terrible para muchas almas cuando los grandes asuntos del mundo, los destinos importantes de la humanidad, que siempre habían quedado lejos en los periódicos y en otros escritos sin importancia, entran como un terremoto en sus propias vidas, en la que el paso lento de las generaciones se transforma en la huella de un ejército invasor o en la colisión horrenda de la guerra civil, y los padres con canas en su cabello no hacen más que buscar los cadáveres de sus hijos muertos en la flor de la vida, y la chicas olvidan toda su vanidad y se dedican a hacer vendajes para los miembros mutilados de sus prometidos. Y es como si el Poder Invisible, el objeto honrado por sus labios, se hiciera visible, según la imagen usada por el poeta hebreo, haciendo de sus llamas su carruaje, y viajando con las alas del viento, hasta donde las montañas echan humo y las llanuras se estremecen ante las continuas amenazas feroces. A menudo, la buena causa aparece tras el estruendo de la fuerza, cuando empieza a aplacarse; los mártires vilipendiados mueren, y no se ve ningún ángel sosteniendo la corona de laurel. Es entonces cuando se prueba la sumisión del alma al Altísimo, e incluso ante los ojos de la frivolidad, la vida aparece como algo distinto de la lucha humana con el terrible rostro del deber, y la religión se muestra tal cual es, como algo más que un consuelo privado.

Ese era el tipo de crisis que estaba empezando a afectar la pequeña vida de Gwendolen: por primera vez sentía la presión de una fuerza amplia y misteriosa, por primera vez se desprendía de la supremacía de su mundo, y tomando conciencia que su futuro no era más que una parte de la existencia global. Todo lo que había pasado como esposa y viuda le había dejado todavía la impresión que la había acompañado desde la infancia: que todo lo que la rodeaba estaba hecho de alguna manera para ella, y era precisamente por esto que ni se le había pasado por la cabeza tener ningún tipo de celos en su relación con Deronda; de forma espontánea no pensaba que le perteneciera a nadie más que a ella. Pero de repente se enfrentó a un hecho más inesperado y profundo que los celos personales: algo espiritual y vagamente trascendental que la apartaba por completo, y sofocaba toda su furia con la humillación.

Había habido un largo silencio. Deronda había permanecido de pie, sin moverse, agradecido incluso por que hubiera un intervalo antes de seguir, y Gwendolen había quedado sentada como una estatua con las manos juntas y los ojos mirando al vació —la intensidad de sus reflexiones refrenando

cualquier otra excitación—. Al final algo le ocurrió que la hizo volverse hacia Deronda y decir con voz temblorosa:

—¿Es eso todo lo que puede contarme?

La pregunta le alcanzó como un dardo.

—El judío que acabo de mencionar —respondió, no sin cierto temblor en su tono—, el hombre remarcable que tanto ha influenciado mi manera de ver las cosas, tal vez no sea del todo desconocido para usted. Es el hermano de la señorita Lapidoth, a la que ha oído cantar en varias ocasiones.

Una ola de recuerdos invadió a Gwendolen, y se extendió profunda y dolorosamente por su cuello y su rostro. Lo primero que le vino a la mente fue la escena de esa mañana a la que había ido a ver a Mirah, y había oído la voz de Deronda leyendo, y le dijeron, sin prestarle entonces atención, que estaba leyendo hebreo con el hermano de Mirah.

—Está muy enfermo, muy cerca de la muerte, ahora… —continuó Deronda, nervioso, y se paró en seco. Sentía que debía esperar. ¿Adivinaría ella el resto?

—¿Le dijo que fui a verla? —dijo Gwendolen, bruscamente, levantando la vista.

—No —dijo Deronda—. No la entiendo.

Ella apartó de nuevo la vista, y se quedó sentada pensando. Poco a poco fue desapareciendo el color de su rostro y su cuello, y se quedó tan pálida como antes, con esa palidez casi marchita que se observa tras un sonrojo doloroso. Al final dijo —sin volverse hacia él— en voz baja y comedida, como si estuviera solo pensando en voz alta, preparando lo que iba a decir más tarde:

—¿Pero *puede* usted casarse?

—Sí —dijo Deronda, también en voz baja—. Voy a casarme.

Al principio no hubo ningún cambio en la actitud de Gwendolen: solo empezó a temblar de forma visible; luego, miró hacia delante con los ojos dilatados, como si tuviera algo enfrente de ella, hasta que estiró sus brazos al completo, y dio un grito con voz sofocada:

—Ya lo dije que me quedaría abandonada. He sido una mujer cruel. Y estoy abandonada.

La angustia de Deronda era insoportable. No podía evitarlo. Le cogió sus dos manos estiradas y las sostuvo juntas, y se arrodilló a sus pies. Ella era la víctima de su felicidad.

—Soy cruel, soy muy cruel —repitió, con una especie de gemido, mirándola suplicante.

Su presencia y su contacto parecieron producirle una visión terrible, y se encontró con su mirada de pena desde el suelo y con el retorno de la conciencia tras el desmayo. Pero se le quedó mirando sin más movimiento que el ligero arqueo de las cejas que suele acompañar los momentos en los que se reavivan ciertos recuerdos con ternura. La mirada de pena le trajo a la memoria lo que parecía un momento muy lejano: la primera vez que vio esa mirada fue en la biblioteca de la Abadía. Siguieron unos sollozos, y rodaron grandes lágrimas. Deronda no le soltaba las manos; las sostenía todavía con una de las suyas, y con la otra le frotó los ojos con su pañuelo. Ella se sometió como una niña a la que tranquilizaban, haciendo un esfuerzo por hablar, pero los sollozos no le dejaban. Al final pudo decir, de forma entrecortada:

—Le dije… le dije… que lo mejor que me pasó… lo mejor… fue conocerle.

Sus ojos se llenaron también de lágrimas. Ella soltó una de sus manos, e hizo lo mismo que él: quitarle sus lágrimas.

—No nos separaremos del todo —dijo él—. Le escribiré siempre, cuando pueda, ¿me responderá?

Esperó hasta que ella dijo en un susurro:

—Lo intentaré.

—Estaré más a su lado de lo que lo he estado hasta ahora —dijo Deronda con gentil apremio, dejando sus manos e incorporándose—. Si hubiéramos pasado juntos más tiempos, habríamos sentido más nuestras diferencias, y tendríamos una sensación más grande de alejamiento. De esta forma tal vez no nos veamos nunca más. Pero puede que nos sintamos más cerca.

Gwendolen no dijo nada, pero se levantó automáticamente. Su mirada desgastada por la pena, tal como la que muestra el sol cuando se suben las persianas tras el entierro de la alegría de la vida, le hicieron odiar sus propias palabras: parecían llevar en sí la dureza del consuelo fácil. Ella sentía que él se iba, y que nada podía evitarlo. Lo sentía como un susurro terrible en su oído, que ensordecía cualquier otra consciencia; y no se había dado cuenta de que se había levantado.

Deronda no pudo volver a hablar. Pensó que debían separarse en silencio, pero era difícil dar el paso, hasta que ella le miró con una especie de intención en sus ojos, lo cual le ayudó a él. Avanzó un poco para ofrecerle su mano en silencio, y cuando ella puso la suya en ella, dijo lo que había estado pensando:

—Ha sido usted muy bueno conmigo. No he merecido nada. Intentaré… intentaré vivir. Pensaré en usted. ¿Qué he hecho de bueno? Solo he hecho daño. No me permita que le haga daño a usted. Será lo mejor para mí…

No pudo terminar. No es porque estuviera sollozando, sino porque el intenso esfuerzo que hizo para hablar la dejó temblando. La carga de esa difícil rectitud hacia él era un peso bajo el cual se tambaleaba todo su cuerpo.

Se inclinó para besarle la mejilla, y él besó la suya. Luego se miraron el uno al otro por un instante con las manos unidas, y él se dio la vuelta.

Cuando ya se hubo marchado, su madre entró y la encontró sentada sin moverse.

—Gwendolen, querida, pareces muy enferma —dijo, inclinándose sobre ella y tocando sus manos frías.

—Sí, mamá. Pero no tengas miedo. Viviré —dijo Gwendolen, rompiendo a llorar con histeria.

Su madre la convenció para irse a la cama, y la vigiló. Durante el resto del día y la mitad de la noche le daban ataques continuos de espanto, pero gritaba en medio de ellos a su madre:

—No tengas miedo. Viviré. Pretendo vivir.

Al final consiguió dormirse; y cuando se despertó por la luz de la mañana, miró fijamente a su madre y le dijo con ternura:

—¡Ah, pobre mamá! Has estado aquí sentada conmigo. No te pongas triste. Viviré. Seré mejor.

Capítulo 70

> En las variadas áreas de la experiencia humana se mezclan todas las estaciones como en la Edad de Oro: flor y fruto van unidas; la hoz cosecha al mismo tiempo que se esparce la semilla; uno recoge el racimo verde y otro pisa la uva. Mejor dicho, en cada una de nuestras vidas la cosecha y la primavera son siempre una, hasta que la misma Muerte nos reúne y nos siembra de nuevo en sus campos invisibles.

ENTRE LAS BENDICIONES DEL AMOR APENAS HAY UNA MÁS EXQUISITA QUE LA sensación que al unirnos a la vida de nuestra amada podemos cuidar de su felicidad, traer consuelo donde había oprobios, y sobre los recuerdos de privación y sufrimiento, abrir una de las fuentes más dulces de alegría. El amor de Deronda por Mirah estaba fuertemente impregnado con ese bendito sentido protector. Incluso desde su etapa infantil, ella había comenzado a caminar entre espinas; y la primera vez que él había observado su rostro, le pareció la imagen infantil de la desesperación.

Sin embargo, ahora brillaba como una flor oscura pero teñida de marfil ante la cálida luz de la satisfacción, pensando que cualquier pena futura la compartiría con Deronda, con lo que no podría referirse a ella más que como un bien. Y él contemplaba la sobria alegría que aportaba una nueva belleza a sus movimientos, así como su actitud habitual en reposo, con un gozo que le hacía reconocer que le alegraba completamente haberla librado de la pena. Ella no sabía nada del sufrimiento de Hans o del dolor de Gwendolen; pues tras la declaración de que el amor oculto de Deronda era para ella, se explicó fácilmente la ansiosa solicitud de Gwendolen hacia él como parte de su agradecimiento y dependencia por su bondad, como ella misma había sentido. Y las palabras de Deronda acerca de la señora Grandcourt confirmaron ese punto de vista, aunque él nunca hablaba de ello salvo de una manera muy distante. Mirah se prestó rápidamente a creer que había sido un ángel salvador para muchas almas además de la suya. Lo único sorprendente era que, entre todas ellas fuera ella la que se hubiera quedado con el gozo de estar continuamente a su lado.

Así que cuando el velo nupcial cubrió a Mirah, no escondió ningún temblor ni duda alguna, tan solo un sentimiento de respeto por la aceptación de un gran don que implicaba usarlo bien. Y el palio nupcial de terciopelo no había albergado nunca a unos novios más hermosos, ni había deseado con

tanto ardor su pueblo una futura descendencia; no accedieron jamás al sacramento del matrimonio labios más honestos; la bendición del matrimonio no halló nunca una promesa de cumplimiento más perfecta que en la integridad de su compromiso mutuo. Naturalmente, se casaron según el rito judío. Y puesto que parece que aún no hay religión que pida que cuando hacemos una fiesta invitemos solo al rango más elevado de nuestros conocidos, esperamos que sean pocos los que se ofendan por saber que entre los invitados a la pequeña fiesta de la boda de Deronda estaba la familia Cohen al completo, con la única excepción del bebé, que inteligentemente se había quedado en casa para alimentarse mejor. ¿Cómo podría haber permitido Mardoqueo que estos amigos en su adversidad hubieran quedado excluidos de regocijarse juntamente con él?

La señora Meyrick entendió esto tan bien que ya no le importaba encontrarse con el prestamista judío, y estaba allí con sus tres hijas, todas ellas jubilosas de saber que el matrimonio de Mirah con Deronda coronaba un romance que siempre quedaría grabado dulcemente en su memoria. ¿Pues quién de ellas, madre o hijas, no había tomado una buena parte en él, haciendo lo posible por apoyarla a ella cuando lo había necesitado? Si Hans hubiera estado allí, habría sido mejor; pero Mab ya había observado que los hombres tenían que sufrir por ser tan inoportunos; ¿qué habría pasado si ella, Kate y Amy se hubieran enamorado del señor Deronda? Pues siendo mujeres no habrían hecho tanto el ridículo.

Los Meyrick fueron recompensados por superar sus prejuicios oyendo un discurso del señor Cohen, que tenía la rara cualidad entre los oradores de no seguir el modelo habitual. Jacob comió mucho más de lo que sus años le permitían, y contribuyó a que se oyeran pequeñas risotadas como acompañamiento al discurso de su padre, no con irreverencia, sino con el verdadero sentimiento de que esta familia era realmente peculiar; mientras, Adelaida Rebekah, con un vestido nuevo de Sabbath, mantenía un aspecto serio de responsabilidad.

Los ojos brillantes de Mardoqueo, profundamente hundidos, contemplaban la escena con la ternura y benignidad de un espíritu que ya se había elevado a una distancia que anulaba los requerimientos egoístas y dejaba espacio solo para la comprensión. Pero continuamente, después de que su mirada viajara por los demás, volvía a reposar en Deronda con un fresco brillo de afecto confiado.

La fiesta de la boda fue humilde, pero Mirah no se quedó sin espléndidos regalos. Tan pronto como se conoció el compromiso, hubo amigos que les enviaron espléndidos objetos. Sir Hugo y Lady Mallinger se tomaron la molestia de proveerles con un equipo completo para su viaje por el este, así como un precioso relicario con la inscripción: *Que todas las bendiciones acompañen a la esposa de nuestro querido Daniel Deronda. H y L. M.* Los Klesmer enviaron un reloj de precisión, también con una bonita inscripción.

Pero algo más preciado que el oro y las joyas le llegó a Deronda de su vecindario de Diplow la mañana en la que se casó. Era una carta con estas palabras:

> No piense en mí con pena el día de su boda. He recordado sus palabras: que puedo vivir para ser una de las mejores mujeres, que hará sentir a los demás ser felices por haber nacido. Todavía no sé cómo podré hacerlo, pero usted sabe más que yo. Si alguna vez ocurre, habrá sido por su ayuda. Yo solo pensé en mí, y le causé a usted pena. Me duele ahora pensar en su dolor. No debe sufrir nunca más por mí. Todo está bien, lo mejor que me ha pasado ha sido conocerle.
>
> GWENDOLEN GRANDCOURT

Los preparativos de la partida de los tres hacia el este comenzaron enseguida; pues Deronda no podía negar a Esdras su deseo de partir cuanto antes, para que pudiera ir con ellos, en lugar de retrasarles el viaje porque tuvieran que cuidarle. No creía que la vida de Esdras durara más que el viaje, pues mostraba síntomas que revelaban que había comenzado el último estadio de su enfermedad. Pero el mismo Esdras había dicho:

—No importa donde muera, mientras esté contigo.

Pero no fue con ellos. Una mañana temprano le dijo a Deronda:

—No me abandones hoy. Moriré antes de que termine el día.

Decidió vestirse y sentarse en su silla como siempre, Deronda y Mirah cada uno a un lado del otro, y durante varias horas estuvo inusualmente en silencio, sin hacer siquiera un esfuerzo por hablar, sino mirándoles ocasionalmente con ojos llenos de un significado de descanso, como si les asegurara que aunque estos últimos suspiros eran duros de pasar, sentía bajo ellos un océano de paz.

No fue hasta la última hora de la tarde, cuando la luz se apagaba, que cogió una mano a cada uno y dijo, mirando a Deronda:

—La muerte viene hacia mí como el beso divino que es a la vez separación y reunión, que me lleva lejos de tus ojos, pero me da plena

presencia en tu alma. Donde tú vayas, Daniel, yo iré. ¿No ha empezado ya? ¿No ha penetrado mi aliento en tu alma? Viviremos en comunión.

Hizo una pausa, y Deronda esperó, pensando que aún le diría algo más. Pero lentamente y con esfuerzo, Esdras, apretándoles las manos, se erigió y pronunció en hebreo la confesión de Unidad divina, que por muchas generaciones ha estado en los labios de los Israelitas moribundos.

Se echó hacia atrás con suavidad en su silla, y ya no habló más. Pero pasaron así varias horas hasta que dejó de respirar, abrazado por Mirah y Deronda.

> Nada de aquí debe hacernos derramar lágrimas, nada hacernos gemir
> o encoger nuestro corazón; ninguna debilidad, ni desprecio
> ni desaprobación o culpa; nada salvo el bien y lo justo
> y lo que nos lleve al reposo de una muerte tan noble[314].

F I N

George Eliot, seudónimo de Mary Anne Evans, nació en Chilvers Coton (Warwickshire), el 22 de noviembre de 1819. Su padre era agente inmobiliario. Estudió en la escuela local de Nuneaton y después en un internado de Coventry, una formación que rara vez se dispensaba a las mujeres en aquella época.

A los diecisiete años, tras la muerte de su madre y el matrimonio de su hermana mayor, regresó a casa para cuidar a su padre. A partir de entonces fue autodidacta. Su primer trabajo literario, en el que trabajó desde 1844 a 1846, fue la traducción de Vida de Jesús, del teólogo alemán David Strauss. En 1851 viajó durante dos años por Europa, y a su regreso escribió reseñas de libros para la revista *Westminster Review*. Más tarde fue nombrada subdirectora de la revista, cargo que la puso en contacto con las principales figuras literarias de la época, como Harriet Martineau, John Stuart Mill, Herbert Spencer o George Lewes. Conocer a Lewes, filósofo, científico y crítico, fue uno de los acontecimientos más importantes de su vida. Se enamoraron y decidieron vivir juntos a pesar de que Lewes estaba casado y no

podía divorciarse. Sin embargo, Eliot consideró su larga y feliz relación con Lewes como un matrimonio.

En 1856, alentada por Lewes, empezó a escribir novelas. A su primer relato, «Amos Barton», publicado en Blackwoods Magazine en enero de 1857, siguieron otros dos en el mismo año, que aparecieron después reunidos en un libro bajo el título de «Escenas de la vida clerical» (1858). Lo firmó con el seudónimo de George Eliot y mantuvo en secreto su identidad durante muchos años. Entre sus obras más famosas se encuentran «Adam Bede» (1859), «El molino junto al Floss» (1860) y «Silas Marner» (1861). Sus viajes por Italia inspiraron su siguiente novela, «Romola» (1863). Poco después escribió sus dos obras maestras: «Felix Holt, el Radical» (1866), sobre la política británica, y, sobre todo, «Middlemarch» (1872), que ha sido considerada por parte de la crítica como la mejor novela jamás escrita en lengua inglesa. Seguiría «Daniel Deronda» (1876), una obra en la que ataca el antisemitismo y simpatiza con el nacionalismo judío.

Eliot está considerada la más importante escritora de la era victoriana, y fue admirada por contemporáneos como Emily Dickinson y escritores posteriores como Virginia Woolf. Después de la muerte de Lewes, acaecida en 1878, Eliot se retiró y dejó de escribir. En mayo de 1880 se casó con John Cross, un banquero estadounidense que había sido amigo suyo y de Lewes durante mucho tiempo, y que sería su primer biógrafo. Sin embargo, George Eliot murió apenas siete meses después, el 22 de diciembre de 1880, en Londres.

Notas

[1] En medio de las cosas. La autora justifica con esta introducción que la novela comience a mitad del tiempo cronológico de la acción.

[2] Alusión al *Fausto* de Goethe, en el que la primera parte del prólogo transcurre en la tierra, mientras que la segunda ocurre en el cielo.

[3] Antigua moneda francesa.

[4] Hagan su juego, señoras y señores.

[5] Ya no se puede apostar.

[6] Una especie de diván o sofá sin respaldo.

[7] Nariz respingona.

[8] Personaje femenino de la mitología grecolatina, caracterizada como seductora terrible, fría y astuta. Viene a ser un antecedente de la vampiresa moderna.

[9] Como es debido.

[10] Rusia.

[11] Título nobiliario inglés de orden inferior al de barón, pero superior al de caballero.

[12] Un nuevo papel.

[13] El Cervino o Matterhorn es una espectacular montaña de los Alpes con forma de pirámide. Su pico fue alcanzado por primera vez en julio de 1865 por Edgard Whymper, tres meses antes de la escena de este capítulo.

[14] Capítulo 2, versículos 7-8.

[15] Se refiere a un próspero dueño de plantaciones en las indias americanas.

[16] Franz Snyders (1579-1657), pintor flamenco de escenas de animales y de caza.

[17] Patrona de la música.

[18] Arzobispo de Canterbury en la época de Carlos I.

[19] Diplomático ruso, ministro de asuntos exteriores de 1822 a 1856.

[20] Otorgar una prebenda, que es el canon de bienes o rentas que se asigna a un eclesiástico en las catedrales o colegiatas para que puedan llevar a cabo las funciones inherentes a su cargo.

[21] El fiel Achates, en la Eneida, el fiel amigo y escudero de Eneas.

[22] *Las preciosas ridículas* (1659): «GORGIBUS. —Te digo que el matrimonio es una cosa santa y sagrada, y que es obrar como gente honrada empezar por eso. MADELÓN. —¡Dios mío! ¡Si todo el mundo se os semejase, se acabaría muy pronto una novela! Bonita cosa si Ciro se casara lo primero con Mandané y Aroncio contrajero casamiento, sin dificultad, con Clelia… Dejadnos forjar a nuestro gusto la trama de nuestra novela y no apresuréis tanto su final».

[23] Referencia a la historia de Griselda, sinónimo de paciencia y fortaleza, del *Decameron* de Bocaccio, día 10, cuento 10.

[24] William Shakespeare. *Macbeth*. Acto II, Escena III, 108-109: «¿Quién puede ser al mismo tiempo sabio e idiota, templado y furioso, leal e indiferente?».

[25] W. Shakespeare. *Mucho ruido y pocas nueces*. Acto III. Escena I. 52-54.

[26] Cara a cara.

[27] «La fuerza es débil, solo el deseo es fuerte» del *Fausto* de Goethe.

[28] Torcuato Tasso (1544-95) Poeta italiano, encerrado en prisión al final de su vida por locura. Ha sido objeto de novelas y óperas a lo largo de la historia de la literatura.

[29] Poema épico del citado poeta italiano Torquato Tasso.

[30] W. Shakespeare. *El sueño de una noche de verano*. Acto V. Escena I. 12

[31] Inocencia.

[32] Jenny Lind (1820-1887) Famosa soprano de Suecia, conocida como *el ruiseñor sueco*.

[33] Alegre, triste, y reflexivo.

[34] Alexander Pope (1688-1744), poeta inglés.

[35] Bernard le Bovier de Fontenelle: *Entretenimientos sobre la pluralidad de los mundos habitados* (1686): «¿Cree usted que me ha humillado por haberme enseñado que la tierra gira alrededor del sol? Le juro que mi autoestima no ha disminuido lo más mínimo».

[36] Del francés, «cuadros vivos»: un grupo de personas inmóviles como figuras de cera, que representan una escena.

[37] Famosa actriz de mediados del siglo XIX que interpretó casi todos los papeles principales de Corneille y Rancine.

[38] W. Shakespeare. *Othello* Acto III. Escena III. 90.

[39] Homero. *La Ilíada* Canto I, v. 348. Briseida fue secuestrada de la tienda de Aquiles por Agamenón.

[40] El *Cuento de Invierno* de Shakespeare. En él, el rey Leontes acusa injustamente a su mujer Hermione de serle infiel, la cual muere de pena. Años más tarde, un escultor realiza una estatua de Hermione que acaba recobrando vida.

[41] Unos 15 cm.

[42] *El Calendario del Pastor*, Spenser. En esta obra, el autor utiliza al máximo la gran flexibilidad poética de la lengua inglesa, empleando un vocabulario formado principalmente por palabras obsoletas y frases hechas, con el fin de transmitir una sensación de antigüedad.

[43] Lady Hester Stanhope (1776-1839): dejó Inglaterra en 1810 y se dedicó a viajar por Oriente Próximo.

[44] John Scout, Conde de Eldon (1751-1838)

[45] Madame Roland (1754-1793), ferviente seguidora de los girondinos, que murió ejecutada gritando: —Oh, libertad, cuántos crímenes se cometen en tu nombre.

[46] «Serás feliz, querida». «Sí, mamá, como tú».

[47] Cambio de ropa. Referencia a la historia de M. Jacob, de Rodolphe Töpffer (1833), dibujante de cómics. Jacob es un bufón cuyas ropas prenden fuego y debe cambiarse.

[48] *Taste*: gusto. Test: prueba. Las palabras inglesas comparten las letras t y s en la misma posición.

[49] En la mitología griega, bella hija del titán Atlas, que agasajó a Ulises para que se quedara en su isla.

[50] En alemán en el original.

[51] En la Iliada, rey de Pilos, anciano y sabio.

[52] Sir Joshua Reynolds (1723-1792): pintor inglés, famoso por sus retratos.

[53] Baile de cinco movimientos bailado por cuatro parejas formando un cuadrado.

[54] Giacomo Meyerbeer (1791-1864) Autor de numerosas operas francesas, y Augustin Eugène Scribe (1791-1861), su libretista.

[55] Desesperado.

[56] William Shakespeare. *Primera parte del Rey Enrique IV*. Acto V, Escena II.

[57] Oficios que requieren escaso o nulo trabajo, y del que se obtienen ventajosos resultados.

[58] Sal 60, 8.

[59] Una yarda son 91,44 cm.

[60] Apropiado.

[61] Tipo de escritura usado en los manuscritos griegos y latinos escritos entre los siglos III y VIII consistente en usar mayúsculas formadas con más curvas de lo que usualmente tienen.

[62] Obra de W. Shakespeare (*As you like it*)

[63] «Apresúrate despacio».

[64] El nombre usado por Ovidio, Teócrito y Virgilio para varias de sus amantes.

[65] En su *Viaje al Tibet*, Huc describe la idea de escribir oraciones en papeletas y lanzarlas al aire pidiendo caballos a Buda, para que este convierta las papeletas en caballos reales.

[66] Un elemento sorprendente e imprevisto.

[67] Soy mi propio ancestro. Se refiere a que no necesita provenir de una familia con títulos nobiliarios para ser emperador, sino que con él empieza la genealogía.

[68] Encadenado por Zeus, era visitado cada noche por un águila que le devoraba el hígado, y al ser inmortal, volvía a crecerle cada día para volver a sufrir por la noche.

[69] Peluca llevada en la corte de Carlos II después de la Restauración (1660)

[70] Sir Meter Lely (1618-1680): pintor retratista de la corte de Carlos II.

[71] Sir Godfrey Kneller (1646-1723): pintor retratista de la corte de Guillermo III y Jorge I.

[72] Pintores retratistas del siglo XVIII.

[73] Referencia a los escudos de las familias.

[74] Retratista de la época.

[75] Pericles (495 a. C.-429 a. C.), orador y político ateniense, promotor de las artes y la literatura.

[76] Giuseppi Mario (1808-1883) y Enrico Tamberlik (1822-1889): tenores italianos.

[77] Roberto I (1274-1329): rey de Escocia y uno de los guerreros más famosos de su generación.

[78] Aburrimiento.

[79] *Whigs* y *Tories*: partidarios de partidos políticos ingleses opuestos.

[80] Lord Byron (1788-1829): poeta inglés que nació patihendido, esto es, con los dedos del pie vueltos hacia dentro.

[81] Robert Clive (1725-1774): Militar británico, que a pesar de no ser un estratega de gran talento ni un soldado experimentado logró importantes victorias.

[82] Poema filosófico escrito por Percy Shelley (1792-1822) y publicado cuando contaba con 20 años.

[83] Charles Lamb (1775-1834): ensayista inglés que sufrió periodos de enfermedades mentales y que trabajó en Christ’s Hospital, una escuela dominical desoladora y llena de violencia.

[84] Hans Holbein el Joven (1497?-1543): artista alemán, uno de los maestros del Renacimiento.

[85] Protagonista de una de las sagas de *Las mil y una noches*.

[86] W. Wordsworth: *Oda a la inmortalidad. Recuerdos de la primera infancia*.

[87] Dante. *La Divina Comedia*. Infierno V: «No hay mayor dolor que acordarse de los tiempos felices en la miseria».

[88] Novela de Walter Scott, en la que una judía se enamora del protagonista.

[89] Nombre de pila de Sulpice Guillaume Chevalier (1801?-1866), caricaturista francés.

[90] Al modo chino.

[91] *Historia de un recluta*.

[92] Friedrich von Schiller (1759-1805). La cita hace referencia a su Oda a la Alegría.

[93] Diosa de la luna en la mitología griega.

[94] Lawrence Sternee (1713-1768): *Viaje sentimental por Francia e Italia*.

[95] Orestes, personaje de la mitología griega, que tuvo que vengar la muerte de su padre a manos del amante de su esposa. Rinaldo, héroe cristiano en la ópera de Haendel que lleva el mismo nombre.

[96] Robert Southey (1774.1843): poeta inglés.

[97] Protagonista de la Historia de Camaralzamán, de *Las Mil y unas noches*.

[98] Angelito.

[99] Unos 280 litros.

[100] W. Shakespeare. *Enrique VIII*, Acto II, Escena III.

[101] Pedro Abelardo (1079-1142), filósofo francés, que mantuvo una relación amorosa con la joven Eloísa, por muchos considerada el primer ejemplo documentado de amor en clave «moderna», como pasión y devoción absoluta y recíproca.

[102] Franz Liszt (1811-1886), pianista y compositor húngaro.

[103] Figura procedente de las leyendas alemanas medievales y que sirvió de base para la ópera que lleva su nombre de Richard Wagner.

[104] Mago galés del siglo VI que inspiró numerosas leyendas medievales, y conocido sobre todo por la epopeya artúrica. Acabó sus días en el bosque de Brocelianda (Bretaña), donde fue recluido en un árbol por su compañera Vivian.

[105] Héroe de la mitología griega, que durante diez años vivió multitud de aventuras por el Mediterráneo mientras su fiel esposa Penélope le esperaba. Fue mantenido cautivo siete años por la ninfa Calipso. Telémaco es el hijo de Ulises y Penélope.

[106] Félix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy (1809-1847), compositor alemán del período romántico.

[107] Título nobiliario del Reino Unido.

[108] El paneslavismo fue un movimiento político y cultural, cuyo objetivo fue la unión cultural, religiosa y política de los países eslavos de Europa en una sola institución política.

[109] Personaje de las leyendas medievales cristianas, un judío que insultó a Jesús durante el camino hacia la Crucifixión, por lo que este lo condenó a «errar hasta su retorno».

[110] Literalmente: «Como un puño en el ojo» —algo muy molesto—.

[111] Te he amado y todavía te amo.

[112] Referencia a Jean Jacques Rousseau y a su Discurso sobre las Ciencias y las Artes.

[113] Louis Antonie León Saint-Just, (1767-1794), político revolucionario francés.

[114] Ver nota 4 del capítulo 5. Como el lector recordará, la señora Arrowpoint había escrito una novela sobre este personaje.

[115] Referencia al Salmo 108, versículo 9.

[116] Medida de superficie inglesa: 0,405 Ha.

[117] Giulia Grisi (1811-1869) soprano italiana, que mantuvo un estatus de primma donna durante treinta años.

[118] Canalla.

[119] William Wordsworth (1770-1850), poeta inglés.

[120] Término usado dentro de la Iglesia anglicana, inicialmente en un sentido peyorativo. Los tratadistas religiosos comenzaron a referirse a la tendencia anglocatólica en la iglesia de Inglaterra como «iglesia alta». Por contraste, aquellos teólogos y políticos que buscaban una mayor reforma en la iglesia de Inglaterra y una mayor liberalización de la estructura de la iglesia eran llamados «iglesia baja».

[121] Seda natural marina obtenida de un filamento que segregan ciertos moluscos.

[122] Dos yardas: algo menos de dos metros.

[123] Novela epistolar de Samuel Richardson (1689-1761), escritor inglés, autor de *Pamela* y *Clarissa*.

[124] W. Shakespeare: Soneto XXVII, 8.

[125] Giovanni Battista Moroni (1520-1578), pintor manierista italiano.

[126] Ver nota 12 del capítulo 16.

[127] «Hombre del bosque»: denominación aplicada a varios pueblos africanos, cazadores-recolectores, caracterizados por incorporar sonidos de chasquido o cliqueos.

[128] Walt Whitman (1819-1892): *Vocalismo*, 14-15.

[129] Personaje de *La Tempstad* de W. Shakespeare. Calibán es un salvaje primitivo que representa los aspectos más salvajes y primitivos del ser humano.

[130] Giro lingüístico utilizado por W. Shakespeare en *Othello*, Acto I, escena II.

[131] *Cuento de invierno*, Acto IV, Escena III, 571-572.

[132] Dioses del viento del oeste, el más suave de todos, considerado como un viento fructificador, mensajero de la primavera.

[133] En la mitología romana, personificaciones femeninas de la venganza, que perseguían a los culpables de los crímenes.

[134] Pastor de la mitología griega, a quien se atribuye la invención de la poesía bucólica, tras quedarse ciego por romper su promesa de no tener relación con doncella alguna.

[135] Filósofo griego, famoso por afirmar que el fundamento de todo está en el cambio incesante: «Todo cambia, todo fluye».

[136] John Duns Scoto (1266-1308), teólogo escocés perteneciente a la escolástica.

[137] Claudio Ptolomeo (90-170), astrónomo, creador de un modelo del universo, según el cual la Tierra estaba inmóvil y ocupaba el centro del Universo.

[138] Personaje de la novela *Clarissa*, de Samuel Richardson.

[139] Rebeca es la judía que se enamora de Ivanhoe en la novela *Ivanhoe* de Walter Scott.

[140] Según la mitología romana, los fundadores de Roma raptaron las mujeres de la tribu de los sabinos para convertirlas en sus mujeres. Cuando los sabinos vuelven para vengarse, las mujeres se interpusieron entre ambos combatientes para que dejasen de matarse porque si ganaban los romanos perdían a sus padres y hermanos, y si ganaban los sabinos perdían a sus maridos e hijos.

[141] Nombre con el que se designaban en la Edad Media a los habitantes de una parte de la actual Alemania.

[142] Nada fácil de obtener.

[143] Antigua moneda de plata de Alemania.

[144] Escuela rabínica.

[145] Gregorio Allegri (1582-1652) y Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina (1525-1594), compositores italianos.

[146] El cantor, un músico entrenado en el arte de las cuerdas vocales que dirige la oración cantada.

[147] Plegaria judía de los huérfanos en memoria de los muertos.

[148] Una de las tragedias de Sófocles.

[149] Aria de Beethoven, Opus 65: «¡Ah pérfido! Por piedad, no me digas adiós».

[150] Šelomoh ben Yehudah ibn Gabirol, o Avicebrón como era conocido por los latinos, fue un filósofo y poeta judío andalusí nacido en Málaga hacia 1021 y muerto en Valencia hacia 1058.

[151] St Mary Axe es una calle de Londres y Whitechapel un barrio, habitado históricamente por judíos.

[152] Origen de la expresión ¡Hip, hip hip! ¡Hurra! Esta expresión corresponde al grito de guerra de los cruzados; sus iniciales en latín quieren decir: *Hierosolyma Est Perdita* (Jerusalén ha caído).

[153] Carruaje de dos ruedas.

[154] Se refiere al Duque de Wellington (1769-1852), primer ministro del país de 1828 a 1830.

[155] Obispo de Nápoles del siglo III.

[156] Salomon Maimon (1753-1800): filósofo judío.

[157] Robert Simson (1687-1768): matemático británico que publicó en 1756 *Los elementos de Euclides*.

[158] *Historia de la vida*.

[159] Estilo de ropa de la ciudad de Nueva York.

[160] Sinagoga.

[161] Distrito de Londres, el más importante para el ocio y para la compra.

[162] «Su nombre es Israel. El hechizo de una bruja lo transformó en un perro. Pero cada viernes por la noche el hechizo desaparece y el perro se transforma de nuevo en un hombre».

[163] Heinrich Heine (1797-1856): uno de los más destacados poetas y periodistas alemanes del siglo XIX, considerado el último poeta del Romanticismo.

[164] Mardoqueo es un personaje bíblico, del libro de Ester.

[165] Eugenia es el nombre de la mujer de Napoleón III.

[166] Oración anual por los muertos.

[167] Localidad comercial ubicada en Devon, famosa por sus alfombras.

[168] Se refiere al coste económico.

[169] Baal y Astarté: divinidades fenicias.

[170] Raza canina originaria de Bélgica, un tipo de sabuesos.

[171] «Nada pesa tanto como un secreto. Para las mujeres es difícil guardarlo mucho tiempo. Y por lo que sé sobre el tema, muchos hombres son como las mujeres».

[172] En la mitología griega, Jasón dejó a su amante Medea para unirse con Creúsa.

[173] Adelaida Ristori (1822-1906), reconocida artista dramática italiana.

[174] Autoridad literaria imaginaria y terriblemente tediosa, citada por Walter Scott para presentar hechos del pasado.

[175] Diosas asirias.

[176] Agar, esclava de Sara, la esposa de Abraham, tuvo un hijo con este, Ismael, debido a que Sara era estéril. Fruto del trato cruel de Sara hacia Agar tras el nacimiento de Ismael, madre e hijo se vieron obligadas a huir al desierto.

[177] Período entre 1811 y 1820 en el Reino Unido.

[178] Angelica Catalani (1779-1849): cantante italiana.

[179] Danza rural inglesa en la que los bailadores forman figuras de forma que quedan enfrentados en dos filas, mirándose unos a otros.

[180] Espíritus grandes con ojos graves y serios.

[181] Moritz Retzsch (1779-1857) pintor alemán, famoso por sus grabados del *Fausto* de Goethe, en cuya obra, Mefistófeles es el diablo.

[182] Berenice, de nacionalidad judía, hermana de Agripa II, que imploró a Gessius Florus, procurador romano de Judea durante el reinado de Nerón, que evitara el asesinato de sus gentes, y que vivió como amante del emperador romano Tito. Los romanos no aceptaron que fuera judía.

[183] Columnata abierta, que solía estar rodeada de plantas, para el paseo y la diversión.

[184] *El Ensayo*, obra de George Villiers (1628-1687), poeta inglés y hombre de estado.

[185] Santi Rafael (1483-1520), pintor, arquitecto y escultor. Alcibíades fue un personaje ateniense de alta cuna, que traicionó su ciudad y fue asesinado en el exilio.

[186] Cayo Suetonio (75-160): Historiador romano; «contra su voluntad y la de ella» (*La vida de los doce Césares*).

[187] La nada, el vacío.

[188] Zona cercana al Tíber, en Roma.

[189] La Estrella del Mar, imagen utilizada a menudo por los marineros para referirse a la Virgen María.

[190] Líder populista de la Italia medieval que derrotó a las clases nobles de Roma para dar el poder al pueblo.

[191] Personajes de las obras de Shakespeare *Rey Juan* y *Rey Lear*.

[192] Cañaheja: según la mitología griega, Prometeo subió al cielo por el tallo de esta planta.

[193] En la mitología griega, dioses que personifican la fuerza y la violencia.

[194] Ciudad de Egipto, descrita por Homero como «la ciudad de las cien puertas» por las innumerables puertas abiertas en sus murallas.

[195] Pedro el Ermitaño (1050-1115), clérigo francés, líder religioso de la llamada «Cruzada de los pobres», que sirvió de preludio a la Primera Cruzada.

[196] La Cábala es una de las principales corrientes de la mística judía.

[197] Pantalones bombachos.

[198] Yehudah Haleví (1075-1141), filósofo y médico judío español, uno de los poetas judíos más excelsos de la literatura hebraica-española.

[199] Los gentiles, o sea, los no judíos.

[200] El monte al que subió Moisés para ver la Tierra Prometida justo antes de morir.

[201] Johan Wolfgang von Goethe. *El diván del este y del oeste*: «Lo más seguro es siempre dirigirse al entendido. Cuando has estado torturándote por mucho tiempo, él sabe qué es lo que has hecho mal; incluso puedes esperar su aprobación por lo que hiciste bien».

[202] Ave propia del Asia tropical.

[203] *Los Ensayos de Elia*, es una colección de ensayos escritos por Charles Lamb. La «negra inocencia» a la que aludirá a continuación se refiere a los deshollinadores.

[204] Lord John Rusell (1792-1878), primer ministro de 1865 a 1866.

[205] Antiguo palacio ubicado en el centro de París.

[206] El conde Giacomo Leopardi (1798-1837) fue un poeta, filósofo, filólogo, erudito italiano del Romanticismo. *A Italia* fue escrita en 1818: «Oh, patria mía, veo los muros y los arcos, y las columnas y las enramadas y las imágenes de nuestros antepasados»; «Pero no veo la gloria»; «felices vosotros, que ofrecisteis el pecho a las lanzas enemigas por amor de aquella que también os dio vida»; «Oh, viva, viva: felices vosotros mientras en el mundo se hable o se escriba de vosotros».

[207] Príncipe Anton Radziwill (1775-1833), puso música al Fausto de Goethe.

[208] Ver nota 1 del capítulo 39.

[209] Bien.

[210] Tipo de abrigo impermeable, procedente de la ciudad escocesa de Inverness.

[211] Tiziano (1477-1576), pintor italiano del Renacimiento. El Tributo de la Moneda es un lienzo de 1516 que representa la respuesta de Cristo al fariseo: «Dad al César lo que es del César y a Dios lo que es de Dios» (Mt 22,21).

[212] Uno de los sabios rabínicos que perseveró tras la destrucción del templo de Jerusalén en el año 70 d. C.

[213] Aben Esdras (1092-1167), destacado intelectual judío; hombre polifacético, destacó en poesía, filosofía, gramática, cábala, medicina, matemática y astronomía.

[214] Ver nota 7 del capítulo 38.

[215] El Espíritu de Yahveh.

[216] De *El Paraíso recobrado*, poema épico de John Milton.

[217] «Quod erat demonstrandum», locución latina que significa: «lo que se quería demostrar».

[218] Leopold Zunz (1794-1886), historiador judío. La traducción se da a continuación al inicio del capítulo.

[219] Nombre poético que designa el carácter ideal de Israel (Dt 32,15).

[220] Tipo de goma parecida al caucho, fabricada a base del látex proveniente de árboles del género *Palaquium*.

[221] Cuatro metros y medio.

[222] Referencia a Sir Walter Scott, llamado así durante un tiempo al no reconocer la autoría de sus novelas hasta 13 años después de publicar la primera.

[223] La batalla de Maratón (490 a. C.) fue un enfrentamiento armado que definió el desenlace de la Primera Guerra Médica.

[224] Gisseppe Mazzini (1805-1872), patriota, filósofo y político italiano que ayudó en el proceso de formación de la Italia moderna.

[225] Un tipo de trompeta especial, fabricada a partir del cuerno de un carnero o una cabra, utilizada en varias fiestas judías.

[226] John Keats (1795-1822), poeta inglés. Los versos corresponden al *Soneto al ver los mármoles de Elgin*.

[227] Maimónides (1134-1205) fue el médico, rabino y teólogo judío más célebre de la Edad Media.

[228] Uno de los más distinguidos héroes de la mitología griega, cuyas aventuras se narran en *La Ilíada*.

[229] Harriet Byron, protagonista de la novela *Sir Charles Grandison*, de Samuel Richardson, y la señorita Wardour, protagonista de la novela *El Anticuario*, de Walter Scott.

[230] La estrella más brillante del firmamento.

[231] Anton Van Dyck (1599-1641), pintor flamenco, especialmente dedicado a la eaboración de retratos.

[232] ¿No te defiende ninguno de tus hijos? Las armas, tráeme las armas. Combatiré solo, caeré solo.

[233] Ver nota 16 del capítulo 32.

[234] El antinomismo es una herejía del siglo XVI, que defendía la posibilidad de llevar una vida licenciosa, y que solo la fe bastaba para salvarse.

[235] Ópera de Donizzeti, compositor italiano, estrenada en 1833.

[236] Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592), filósofo, humanista, escritor, político y moralista del Renacimiento.

[237] Los covenanters son los miembros de un movimiento religioso nacido en el seno del presbiterianismo que adoptaron los principios puritanos. Walter Scott habla de ellos en su novela *Eterna mortalidad*.

[238] Buda.

[239] Predicador fanático en la novela *Eterna Mortalidad* de Walter Scott.

[240] Rabino del siglo II d. C.

[241] Comida correcta o apropiada. Se refiere al tipo de alimentos que según los preceptos de la religión judía los practicantes pueden o no pueden ingerir.

[242] William Wordsworth (1770-1850), del *Epitafio para un poeta*.

[243] Pozo que parece convertir los objetos que entran en él en piedras. Históricamente se les ha relacionado con la magia, pero es un fenómeno natural.

[244] Otto von Bismarck (1815-1898), primer ministro de Prusia, logró arrebatar a Dinamarca los ducados de Slesswig y Holstein. Más tarde se convertiría en el primer canciller de Alemania.

[245] En la mitología griega, monstruo femenino del inframundo que convertía en piedra a todos los que la miraban.

[246] Medida inglesa. Una yarda son 91,44 cm.

[247] Robert Browning (1812-1889), poeta y dramaturgo inglés.

[248] Torres en las que se encerraba a prisioneros y se les dejaba morir de hambre.

[249] *Infierno*, Canto XXIX, 43-4: «Con duros dardos de piedad ferrados, y a mi oído mis manos obstruían».

[250] Acaecida el 3 de julio de 1866, permitió un avance considerable en el proceso de la unificación alemana, consolidando la hegemonía prusiana en detrimento del Imperio austríaco.

[251] Erina de Telos, poetisa del siglo IV a. C,, destinada a hilar ante una rueca toda su vida.

[252] Personaje imaginario del mundo medieval que representa un ser mitad mujer mitad serpiente.

[253] Receptáculo adherido a la jamba derecha de los pórticos de las casas «judías», que alberga un «pergamino» enrollado con versículos de la «Biblia». Definiciones: <http://www.babylon.com/definition>.

[254] Uno de los preceptos más importantes de la Torá. «Los atarás como señal sobre tu brazo, y serán un recordatorio entre tus ojos» (Dt 6,8). Consiste en dos pequeñas cajas de cuero unidas a correas de cuero. Cada una de las dos cajas contiene cuatro secciones de la Torá.

[255] Referencia a *I due Foscari*, ópera de Verdi.

[256] La misma fuerza que sirve para resistirse al amor sirve para hacerlo fuerte y duradero. Y las personas débiles afectadas siempre por pasiones no pueden casi nunca ser llenadas por él.

[257] Eósforo: la estrella de la noche, como se conoce a Venus. Hyperion es el sol. La frase podría leerse como: «brillando como la primera estrella cuando el sol se ha puesto».

[258] «Un rabino judío» (1630), obra del pintor Rembrandt, que luego sería conocida como «Busto de un viejo con un yelmo».

[259] Bestia marina del Antiguo Testamento, a menudo asociada con Satanás.

[260] A placer.

[261] Género extinto de mamíferos, parientes de los actuales perezosos.

[262] En la mitología romana, dios de dos caras.

[263] William Browne (1590-1645), poeta inglés. La cita pertenece a la obra *Britannia's Pastorals*. Libro II. Canción I.

[264] Cita del poeta latino del siglo i Aulo Persio Flacco: «[perseguirás en vano el calce que se gira (…) cuando] rueda trasera, corras en el segundo eje».

[265] Los que creen que Dios, contemplando al hombre aun no caído, escogió a algunos para recibir vida eterna, rechazando a todos los demás.

[266] Referencia al Duque de *Lucrecia Borgia*. Ver nota 6 del capítulo 45.

[267] Henry St John, primer Vizconde de Bolingbroke (1678–1751), político y filósofo inglés, miembro de los Tories.

[268] Estructura gramatical hebrea, en la que la raíz de la palabra consta de tres consonantes, que dan un sentido fundamental, mientras que las mutaciones vocálicas cambian el aspecto.

[269] *Don Carlos*, ópera de Verdi. La princesa de Eboli es una traidora pero asaltada constantemente por los remordimientos.

[270] Se refiere al uso del pronombre «thee» en lugar de «you».

[271] Acto V, escena II, 1-2.

[272] Descendiente de Saúl Levi Morteira (1596-1660), rabino de la comunidad portuguesa de Ámsterdam.

[273] Ver nota 14 del capítulo 32.

[274] Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822), *Los Cenci*. Acto II, Escena II.

[275] Región de la Toscana.

[276] Barco fantasma, protagonista de una leyenda, en la que es condenado a vagar eternamente por los océanos.

[277] Recordar debes tu ciencia, que quiere que cuando es perfecto el ser, más sienta el bien y sienta la dolencia. *Infierno*, VI 106-108.

[278] Popular guía de ferrocarriles ingleses, que lleva el nombre de su primer editor.

[279] Manto judío para cubrir la cabeza, usado en la oración.

[280] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *La Canción del viejo marinero*, 438-441.

[281] *Meditaciones*. Libro XI.

[282] Nicholas Breton (1555-1626), poeta y novelista inglés. La cita pertenece a una de sus baladas: «Phillida and Coridon».

[283] La cita original es de Andrew Fletcher of Saulton (1653-1716): «Para aquellos que pueden escribir todas las baladas de una nación, no importa quienes hacen las leyes».

[284] William Paley (1743-1805): filósofo y teólogo utilitarista británico.

[285] Plinio el Viejo (23-79): Escritor, científico, naturalista y militar romano.

[286] *Ricardo II*, Acto II, Escena III, 46-47.

[287] Jeremy Taylor (1613-1667). Escritor y eclesiástico inglés.

[288] John Milton. *Areopagítica*.

[289] Región situada en la frontera entre Jordania y Palestina, cuyos habitantes eran enemigos de los israelitas.

[290] Guido Guinizelli (1213-1260): uno de los primeros poetas y más influyentes de su época en lengua italiana.

[291] *Deja que llore*, aria de Haendel.

[292] Arcángel enviado por Gabriel en busca de Satán en el *Paraíso Perdido* de Milton.

[293] Palabra turca para designar a un infiel o a un no creyente.

[294] Referencia a Génesis 9,12 en el que Dios hizo una alianza con su pueblo en tiempo de Noé mediante el arco entre las nubes.

[295] *Shemá Israel*, una de las principales oraciones judías, en la que se manifiesta su credo en un solo Dios.

[296] Relatos que hacían inteligibles ciertos pasajes del Antiguo Testamento.

[297] Heinrich Heine (1797-1856). *Lamentations of Romanzero*, epígrafe al segundo libro: «La Fortuna es una mujer de vida alegre, y no le gusta permanecer en el mismo sitio; te aparta el cabello de la frente, y te besa rápidamente y se va corriendo. La señora Desgracia, por el contrario, te aprieta contra su pecho; dice que no tiene prisa, se pone a tu a lado a tejer».

[298] Querida, en alemán.

[299] Una de las obras que recoge las discusiones rabínicas sobre leyes judías, tradiciones, costumbres, leyendas e historias.

[300] Heinrich Heine (1797-1856). *Confesiones*: «Moisés, a pesar de su enemistad por el arte, era, no obstante, un gran artista, y tenía el verdadero espíritu del arte que, como el de sus contemporáneos egipcios, se centraba en lo grandioso e indestructible. A diferencia de los egipcios, que construyeron sus obras con piedra y granito, él construyó pirámides de hombres, esculpió obeliscos de hombres, tomó a un pobre esclavo campesino e hizo un pueblo que duraría durante cientos de años. Hizo Israel».

[301] Referencia a dos de los hijos de Noé: Sem y Jafet.

[302] Grupos judíos opuestos; los rabinos consideran prioritaria la tradición oral y en segundo término los textos escritos, mientras que los caraítas solo aceptan estos últimos.

[303] Canto IV, 88-90: «Que esta montaña es tal, que siempre al comenzar abajo es ardua, y es menos mala si a subir se atiende».

[304] Conflicto bélico entre el Imperio ruso y el Reino de Piamonte y Cerdeña, entre los años 1853 y 1856.

[305] John Milton (1608-1674): *Comus*, I, 212-213

[306] Ver nota 16 del capítulo 32.

[307] Robert Browning (1812-1889): poeta y dramaturgo inglés.

[308] *Corazón, corazón mío,* inicio de la canción *Nuevo amor, nueva vida* de Beethoven.

[309] El palio nupcial bajo el cual se realizan las bodas judías.

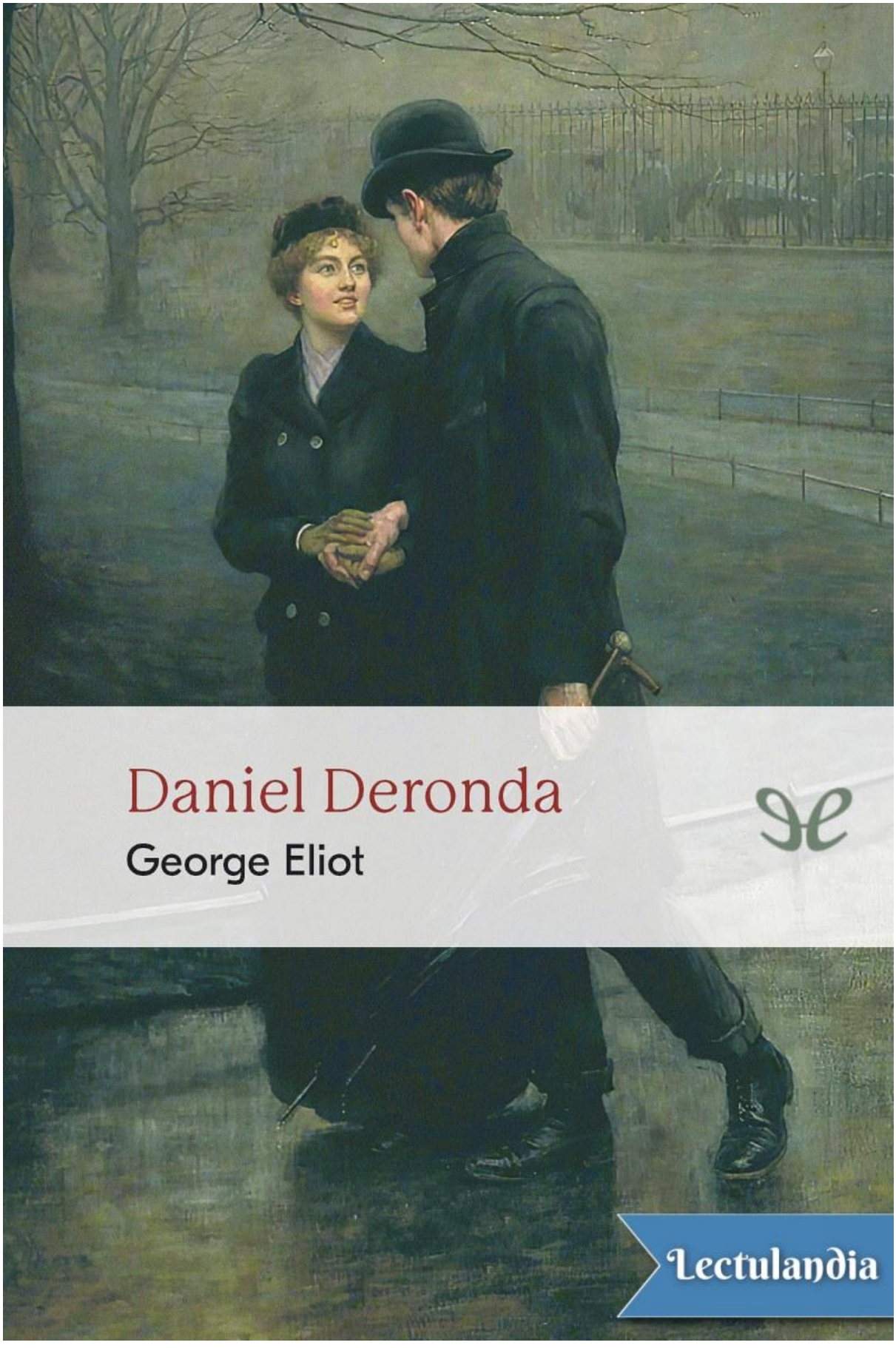
[310] Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834): *Amor* 1-4.

[311] Libro VIII, 608-615.

[312] Thomas Gainsborough (1727-1788), pintor de paisajes y retratista inglés.

[313] Nombre dado a la mujer de Shiva, en la mitología hindú, la cual se arrojó al fuego cuando Shiva fue insultado por su suegro.

[314] John Milton (1608-1674), *Samson Agonistes*.


Daniel Deronda
George Eliot
Lectulandia